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UPRIGHT SPINES AND STICKY SIGNS: AFFECTIVE POLITICS IN BOSNIA'S 2022 ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) are consistently framed by emotionally charged disputes rooted in the country's ethnonational divides. This article analyzes the 2022 general election through the lens of affective politics. Drawing on systematic monitoring of media coverage, it examines mainstream and party-aligned outlets to map how leaders and partisan media mobilized fear, spite (inat), resentment, humiliation, pride, and dignity to rally bases and delegitimize opponents. Rather than appearing as isolated outbursts, these emotions circulated through recognizable repertoires of naming and shaming, commemorative invocations of past injury, and choreographed displays of defiance. The analysis shows how distinct affects were bundled into mutually reinforcing scripts that displaced policy debate and stabilized antagonistic expectations across communities. While the specific cues and targets varied by party and region, the underlying affective grammar was strikingly shared, helping explain both the persistence of bloc voting and the limited traction of cross-ethnic appeals. Conceptually, the article bridges affect theory and discourse analysis to operationalize "affective repertoires" for electoral contexts. Empirically, it demonstrates how these repertoires sustain adversarial structures even under formal democratic competition.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina; elections; affective politics; discourse analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina's elections have unfolded within an institutional architecture designed to prevent the recurrence of war by rigidly partitioning political power along ethnic lines. Yet nearly three decades later, elections in BiH remain not only mechanisms of representation but also symbolic rituals in which competing groups assert dignity, rehearse grievances, and re-enact wartime antagonisms. Parties rarely campaign on coherent socio-economic programs. Instead, electoral mobilization pivots around emotionally charged appeals that draw on the deep affective sediment of war, displacement, and contested statehood.

The 2022 general election was no exception. Campaigns were dominated by the rhetoric of antagonism, performative acts of resistance, and symbolic disputes over identity, history, and sovereignty. Leaders from all three dominant ethnonational blocs, Bosniak, Serb, and Croat, mobilized affect as a political resource. Some emotions, such as spite, were deliberately cultivated through symbolic defiance and tit-for-tat exchanges. Others, such as fear and resentment, were circulated through discursive framings of existential threat and historical victimhood. Still others, including dignity and pride, were invoked through metaphors of resilience and collective perseverance.

This article analyzes the affective dynamics of the 2022 election with the goal of understanding how emotions constitute the terrain of electoral politics in BiH. Drawing on the project that monitored six major media outlets representing diverse partisan allegiances, the analysis highlights the ways in which political leaders used language, metaphor, commemorative practices, and performative acts to mobilize emotional responses. Particular attention is given to spite (*inat*), which remains a distinctive cultural logic of resistance and defiance in Bosnian political life, but the analysis situates spite within a wider affective constellation. By doing so, the article challenges interpretations of BiH elections that reduce political behavior to rational calculation or ethnic "tribalism," arguing instead that affect provides the key to understanding why elections are consistently saturated with symbolic disputes rather than substantive governance debates.

The argument unfolds in five steps. The first section situates the analysis within existing scholarship on political emotions, affect theory, and Balkan politics. The second section outlines the methodology of the project and explains how affective discourse analysis can illuminate the emotional underpinnings of campaign rhetoric.

The third section presents the empirical analysis, organized around the key emotions mobilized in the campaign: spite, fear, dignity, pride, and resentment. The fourth section discusses the broader implications of these findings for understanding electoral politics in divided societies, particularly how emotions stabilize antagonistic structures. The conclusion reflects on the significance of affective politics in BiH and outlines avenues for future research.

The 2022 election thus provides a valuable case for exploring the co-constitution of politics and emotion. Bosnia's fragmented media environment and ethnationally segmented political field make emotions especially visible. Leaders rely on affective repertoires to galvanize support, and voters respond to the visceral pull of pride, humiliation, and fear more than to technocratic policy debates. Understanding this affective terrain is crucial not only for scholars of the Balkans but also for broader literatures on elections in divided societies, where political outcomes are less about rational choice and more about the mobilization of collective feelings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Political science has long wrestled with the role of emotions in shaping political behavior. Rationalist approaches traditionally cast emotions as distortions of interest-based decision making. Yet a growing body of research demonstrates that emotions are not epiphenomenal but central to political judgment and collective action. In *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment*, Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) argue that emotions provide the "on/off switch" for attention and evaluation, directing how citizens engage with political information. Rather than obstructing rationality, emotions structure the terrain on which reasoning occurs.

In contexts of violent conflict and post-conflict societies, emotions are even more decisive. Bar-Tal (2007) shows how fear becomes institutionalized in societies caught in intractable conflicts, generating a siege mentality that sustains antagonism. Halperin and colleagues (2011) examine how group-based emotions such as anger and guilt influence attitudes toward reconciliation. Meanwhile, psychoanalytic approaches, most notably Volkan's (1997) concept of "chosen trauma," highlight how collective identities are anchored in emotionally charged memories of loss and humiliation. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that emotions in divided societies are not fleeting reactions but enduring structures of feeling that shape political life across generations.

Alongside political psychology, affect theory has offered new ways of conceptualizing how emotions socially circulate and attach to political objects. Sara Ahmed (2004) emphasizes the “stickiness” of affective signs, referring to words, metaphors, and images that acquire emotional force by accumulating histories of use and binding communities through shared orientations of love, fear, or hate. Brian Massumi (2002) highlights affect as intensity, operating beneath conscious representation and driving political mobilization through visceral registers. Judith Butler (1997) stresses the performativity of discourse, showing how repeated acts of naming and interpellation constitute subjects through affective investments.

For scholars of nationalism and conflict, these insights illuminate how language, symbols, and rituals reproduce antagonisms. The affective circulation of terms such as “traitor,” “terrorist,” or “genocide” does more than communicate meaning. It binds communities through shared emotional alignment. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as in other divided societies, political discourse is saturated with such sticky signifiers that carry the weight of wartime memories and contested identities. Classic frameworks on collective and cultural memory (Halbwachs 1992; Assmann 2011) likewise clarify how repertoires of remembrance provide reservoirs of affect that are reactivated during campaigns.

The more specific scholarship on the Balkans has increasingly recognized the centrality of emotion to political life. Stef Jansen’s (2015) work on “yearnings in the meantime” captures how everyday life in postwar Bosnia is infused with ambivalence, nostalgia, and frustration, which structures how citizens relate to the state. Ivana Maček’s (2009) ethnography of Sarajevo under siege demonstrates how fear, shame, and humiliation were lived through the body during wartime and how these experiences became embedded in collective memory, later serving as resources for postwar political narratives. Together, these studies show how embodied wartime affects persist as undercurrents in postwar yearnings and grievances. Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers (2006) highlight the politics of dignity in Kosovo, where affective investments in self-respect and humiliation have shaped nationalist mobilization.

The concept of *inat* (spite or obstinate defiance) occupies a special place in any discussion of political affect in BiH. Historically celebrated as a form of resistance to external domination, *inat* has been reinterpreted in the post-Dayton period as a political resource that leaders deploy to mobilize supporters against perceived external threats or domestic rivals. As Bringa (1995) shows, *inat* is deeply embedded in everyday cultural repertoires, where it can be understood both as dignity-affirming defiance and as counterproductive obstruction. Related scholarship highlights adjacent affective dynamics. Helms (2013), for example, traces how gendered narratives of inno-

cence and victimhood became central to postwar nationalism in Bosnia, showing how emotions such as dignity and humiliation are mobilized in ways that empower certain forms of agency while constraining others. Together these studies illustrate the duality of defiance and suffering as affective logics that animate political life in Bosnia.

Another set of literature discusses the performance of collective emotion in the context of electoral cycles in ethnically divided societies. Bieber (2020) shows how ethnonationalist parties in the Balkans sustain dominance by framing elections as existential contests, mobilizing fears of domination and humiliation. Gagnon (2004) argues that nationalist leaders deliberately escalate symbolic conflicts to secure electoral advantage, while others (Mujkić 2007; Mujanović 2018) emphasize how the “ethnopolis” of Bosnia reduces politics to perpetual identity contestation.

What remains understudied, however, is the explicit role of affect in electoral mobilization. Most analyses describe ethnic outbidding in strategic or institutional terms, overlooking the emotional dynamics that make such strategies effective during campaigns. The few exceptions, such as Subotić (2019) on affective memory politics or Halilovich (2015) on mnemonic communities, address how emotions sustain division, but not how they are orchestrated within the rhythms of electoral competition. Ahmed (2004) reminds us that emotions do not exist in isolation but in circulation, acquiring force by attaching to other signs and histories. This article therefore studies the 2022 election as an emotional constellation, and in a manner that avoids reducing Bosnian politics to a caricature of irrational hostility while still acknowledging the visceral power of antagonistic emotions.

By situating the 2022 BiH elections within this interdisciplinary literature, the article makes two contributions. First, it demonstrates that elections in divided societies cannot be understood without tracing the affective infrastructures that sustain them. Second, it extends the study of political emotions by showing how spite, an emotion often dismissed as petty or irrational, functions as a central mobilizing logic in electoral politics. In BiH, spite does not simply coexist with fear and dignity. It draws its meaning from them, forming an emotional assemblage that organizes political life.

3. METHODOLOGY

The empirical foundation of this article derives from a collaborative research initiative that systematically tracked media coverage of the 2022 general election campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The project monitored six widely followed online outlets between 15 August and 1 October 2022, capturing the period of most intense electo-

ral mobilization. The selected portals, Klix.ba, FTV.ba, BHRT.ba, BLportal.com, RTRS.tv, and Dnevnik.ba, were chosen purposively according to three criteria: (1) large daily audience reach; (2) clear editorial or ideological alignment with major political blocs; and (3) high shareability, meaning frequent circulation of political narratives across social media. This cross-section included partisan media aligned with each ethnonational community as well as outlets with reputations for civic or state-oriented perspectives.

This selection does not claim to represent the entire Bosnian media ecosystem (local portals, television, radio, blogs). Instead, it captures a segment of the online environment that plays a central role in agenda-setting, rhetorical escalation, and the circulation of affectively charged discourse. References to “media coverage” in what follows therefore pertain specifically to these six influential online portals.

The dataset encompasses several thousand articles, campaign reports, and op-eds. Rather than focusing exclusively on speeches by party leaders, the monitoring included the mediated amplification of campaign events, symbolic rituals, and commemorations. This approach reflects the recognition that emotions circulate not only through elite statements but also through the processes of repetition, reframing, and exaggeration that media ecosystems provide. Daily media analysis was complemented by a systematic review of party publications, press releases, and programmatic statements from all major political actors, including SDA, SDP, DF, Naša stranka, Narod i Pravda (NiP), SNSD, SDS, PDP, HDZ BiH, and HDZ 1990. All items were archived with their original links, publication dates, and portal identifiers, creating a structured dataset that allowed consistent cross-portal comparison.

The selection of key affects emerged through an interpretive reading of the corpus, where the researcher identified recurrent emotional patterns that consistently appeared across parties and outlets; spite, fear, dignity, pride, humiliation, and resentment were therefore not chosen a priori but surfaced as the most stable and analytically meaningful affective orientations in the material.

3.1 Coding Procedure

Articles were screened manually. Initial coding focused on recurring elements associated with affective mobilization, including:

- naming practices,
- metaphors and bodily imagery (e.g., “keeping the spine upright”) that condensed emotional logics into everyday speech,

- emotional descriptors,
- accusatory or redressive framings, and
- symbolic gestures (e.g., dignity restoration, victimhood claims, enemy degradation).

The coding procedure followed a mixed deductive–inductive approach. Deductively, analysis drew on pre-identified affective categories (spite, fear, dignity/pride, humiliation, resentment, moralized threat) derived from affect theory and conflict scholarship. Inductively, new metaphors, labels, and narrative patterns were allowed to emerge where they recurred across outlets. Although this was not a formal inter-coder reliability study, coding decisions were refined through iterative comparison and consensus, consistent with interpretive discourse-analytic practice.

3.2. Approach to Media Framing

Frames are treated as interpretive packages that link problem definitions, causal explanations, moral evaluations, and suggested responses. In this study, framing was operationalized through the identification of recurring linguistic and symbolic patterns that cohered into affective orientations. For instance, when metaphors of “betrayal,” “selling out,” or “stealing dignity” clustered around a given actor across multiple outlets, these patterns were treated as resentment or humiliation frames.

This approach is manual and interpretive rather than automated or statistical. It prioritizes affective meaning and circulation over frequency counts, following qualitative frame analysis in political communication.

In line with the article’s analytical scope, portals are treated primarily as carriers of elite political discourse, rather than as fully autonomous producers whose editorial ecosystems are compared in detail. At the same time, headlines, repetition, and image selection can amplify affective signals, and the analysis notes such moments when they are relevant to the emotional force of a narrative.

3.3. Affective Discourse Analysis

The analysis employed here draws on the principles of affective discourse analysis. This method combines discourse-analytic attention to language and framing with affect theory’s insights into the circulation of emotions. Specifically, the analysis sought to identify:

- Metaphors and bodily imagery that condensed emotional logics into everyday language.
- Naming practices (e.g., labeling Bosniaks as “Muslims”) that carried affective charge by invoking historical narratives of betrayal, conversion, or domination.
- Symbolic acts and commemorations (e.g., the Day of Serb Unity, wartime memorials) that mobilized pride, resentment, or humiliation through performative repetition.
- Orchestrated crises (e.g., ambassadorial standoffs, impeachment motions) that functioned as staged spectacles of spite designed to humiliate opponents and galvanize supporters.

Rather than coding emotions as discrete variables, the analysis treats them as relational phenomena. Following Ahmed (2004), emotions circulate as “sticky signs,” gaining force through repetition and affective historicity. Thus, when Dodik described resistance to Germany as a matter of “keeping our spine upright,” the analytical task was not merely to categorize the statement, but to trace how the sensory-motor metaphor resonated across partisan divides, attached to memories of wartime suffering, and shaped perceptions of political dignity.

3.4 Operationalization of Key Affects

The key affects analyzed, spite, fear, dignity, pride, humiliation, and resentment, were operationalized through recurring markers in discourse:

- Spite (inat): tit-for-tat exchanges, deliberate obstructionism, sarcastic retorts, declarations of “principle” against external pressure.
- Fear: invocations of existential threat, demographic decline, international conspiracies, or ethnic domination.
- Dignity and pride: bodily metaphors of uprightness, commemorations of survival, cross-border displays of solidarity.
- Humiliation: references to imposed decisions, denial of recognition, ridicule by opponents.
- Resentment: selective memorialization of atrocities, narratives of asymmetric suffering, accusations of betrayal.

These categories were not mutually exclusive. They often overlapped, forming an interlocking affective constellation.

3.5 Limitations

Three limitations merit acknowledgement. First, reliance on media monitoring privileges mediated discourses rather than direct ethnographic observation of voter responses. Second, the dataset is temporally bounded, covering the three months preceding the election; longer-term sedimentation processes extend beyond this scope. Third, affective discourse analysis necessarily involves interpretive judgment; the affective valence of a metaphor or act may vary across audiences. To mitigate this, the analysis triangulates across partisan media ecosystems to identify recurrent emotional patterns.

Despite these limitations, the dataset provides an unusually rich window into the emotional orchestration of a single election cycle. By capturing not only elite statements but also their mediated amplification, the material reveals how spite, fear, dignity, humiliation, and resentment were not incidental but constitutive features of the 2022 campaign.

4. ANALYSIS

The 2022 election campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina unfolded within a dense emotional landscape where multiple affects intersected and reinforced one another. As in previous elections, the 2022 campaign offered little contest over policy alternatives but intense affective battlegrounds, where leaders and media orchestrated sentiments rooted in long histories of conflict, humiliation, and survival. The campaign revealed circulation of not one dominant emotion but a constellation of pride, dignity, humiliation, spite, resentment, and fear. These affects were relational rather than discrete, with spite feeding on perceived humiliation, pride requiring the possibility of subjugation, resentment sustaining antagonism across time, and fear conditioning receptivity to each of the others. Together, they produced a political field where symbolic victories carried more weight than material policies.

4.1 Pride, Dignity, and Humiliation

Among the most explicit and widely circulated emotional registers of the campaign were appeals to pride and dignity, articulated against a persistent shadow of humiliation. Political leaders across the spectrum repeatedly framed their messages in terms of defending dignity and avoiding subjugation, reflecting a long-standing emotional grammar in which recognition and honor are central political stakes.

The metaphor of the “upright spine” illustrates this dynamic vividly. Leaders of all three major ethnonational blocs urged their constituencies to “keep the spine upright” (*držati kičmu uspravnom*). Milorad Dodik used the phrase to frame resistance to Western envoys as a matter of Serb honor (RTRS 2022). His rhetoric suggested that standing firm against foreign pressure was not merely a strategic calculation but an embodied assertion of dignity. Bakir Izetbegović had earlier used the phrase in Bosniak discourse, presenting perseverance in the face of marginalization as proof of resilience (SDA 2018). Željko Komšić invoked similar imagery when rejecting the authority of the Office of the High Representative, vowing that the pro-Bosnian camp would never bend to externally imposed arrangements (Oslobodjenje 2022).

The recurrence of this bodily metaphor across antagonistic political camps is significant. It condensed the promise of collective pride into an embodied posture of uprightness, dramatizing refusal to yield. Yet the metaphor carried deeper connotations. To have a straight spine was to have moral backbone, to be unbroken, to resist humiliation. To bend, by contrast, implied subjugation and shame. The metaphor thus mapped bodily orientation onto political survival, making dignity a matter not of policy but of posture. Its repetition across Serb, Bosniak, and civic discourse revealed a shared affective grammar. Despite opposing visions of Bosnia's future, leaders drew legitimacy from the same embodied language. At the same time, the need to constantly assert uprightness betrayed fragility. The insistence on dignity revealed that humiliation was not only a historical memory but a looming possibility, one that had to be ward off by repeated bodily invocations.

This dialectic also appeared in commemorative practices. One example came in August 2022, when the anniversary of the murder of nine Bosniak civilians near Mostar was publicly marked for the first time in 29 years (Klix 2022). The very delay in recognition had long been felt as humiliation, making its eventual acknowledgment a restoration of dignity. Serb and Croat media outlets mirrored this selectivity, amplifying commemorations aligned with their own narratives while ignoring those that highlighted the suffering of others. What dignified one community through acknowledgment became humiliation for another through omission. In this way, commemorations became sites of emotional asymmetry, where dignity and humiliation were produced simultaneously and relationally.

During the campaign, pride was staged theatrically in orchestrated rituals. On 15 September, Republika Srpska observed the Day of Serb Unity, a newly established holiday designed to emphasize cross-border solidarity between Bosnian Serbs and Serbia. In Bijeljina, Dodik and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić presided over

celebrations that included schoolchildren, cultural performances, and public displays of unity. Dodik even proposed naming the Bijeljina–Rača highway the “Road of Serb Unity” (BL Portal 2022). RS media framed the day as a demonstration of resilience and pride, proof that Serbs remained strong and united. In Sarajevo, media outlets condemned the event as an affront to Bosnia’s sovereignty, highlighting its implicit denial of state legitimacy (Oslobođenje 2022). The same ritual thus generated opposed emotional readings, with dignity and pride for one audience meaning humiliation for another.

These dynamics illustrate what Evelin Lindner (2006) has described as the centrality of humiliation to conflict. It fuels the demand for dignity, and the performance of pride always presupposes an imagined threat. In Bosnia, this dialectic has become institutionalized. Bar-Tal’s (2007) concept of a “societal ethos of conflict” captures how such collective perceptions sustain antagonism, but the electoral context becomes a timeframe when active orchestration of these sentiments intensifies. Pride, dignity, and humiliation were not merely residues of war, but campaign tools, strategically mobilized through metaphors, commemorations, and rituals.

Crucial for understanding electoral strategies, leaders and parties who assembled these discursive acts simultaneously cast themselves as the guardians of dignity and the saviors of collective pride. By presiding over unity rituals or inaugurating long-delayed commemorations, they performed the role of redeemers, dramatizing not only the community’s fragility but their own indispensability as protectors. In this way, every evocation of humiliation created an opportunity for leaders to step forward as salvific figures. The 2022 elections thus unfolded less as contests over governance than as theaters of salvation, where political authority was grounded in the promise to defend honor against perpetual threat.

4.2 Spite and Resentment

Where appeals to pride and dignity projected an aspirational image of collective strength and honor, spite (*inat*) gave the campaign its confrontational edge through gestures of refusal, mockery, and obstruction. Spite functioned as a continuous, performative refusal to concede, to cooperate, or even to acknowledge rivals. Its visceral appeal lay in symbolic victory through obstruction, mockery, or provocation.

Dodik’s repeated reference to Bosniaks as “Muslims” exemplified spiteful politics of naming (RTRS 2022). By reviving a label consciously abandoned as an ethnonym after Yugoslavia, he denied Bosniaks the right of self-identification and evoked long-

standing Serb nationalist narratives of betrayal and conversion. Such gestures were designed to provoke and assert control over identity boundaries. Bosniak media interpreted this as direct humiliation, amplifying it as a flashpoint in the campaign. Naming thus became an act of spite, where the satisfaction lay not in persuasion but in aggravation.

Orchestrated crises served a similar function. The standoff over the German ambassador in late August and September 2022 illustrates this dynamic. As the Serb member of the BiH Presidency, Dodik formally opposed granting agrément to the nominee, declaring that “Germany has no right to interfere in the internal organization of BiH” (SNSD 2022). Outvoted 2–1 by the other Presidency members, he invoked the “vital national interest” mechanism and referred the matter to the Republika Srpska National Assembly. The Assembly did not endorse his claim that rejecting the ambassador was necessary to protect RS interests, so the veto failed. In legal and institutional terms, Dodik lost at both levels, and outlets such as Klix mocked the episode as a “fijasko” (Klix 2022). But the futility underscored the performative character of the crisis. For supporters, the mere act of challenging Germany dramatized toughness and obstinacy. Spite here became foreign-policy performance, an emotional spectacle in which defiance itself mattered more than the outcome.

Tit-for-tat exchanges between leaders further demonstrated spite’s cyclical nature. On 9 September, Izetbegović remarked that those who disliked Bosnia could leave “with only the dirt on their shoes” (Klix 2022). RS officials pounced. Dodik responded that “the Serb people have been on their land for centuries” (BL Portal 2022), while Assembly Speaker Nedeljko Čubrilović condemned Izetbegović’s statement as chauvinist (BL Portal 2022). RS outlets published multiple pieces amplifying the dispute across several days (RTRS 2022; BL Portal 2022).

Legislative acts became vehicles of spite as well. The RS Law on Immovable Property, repeatedly annulled by the Constitutional Court, was defiantly re-passed. Dodik’s declaration that “no matter how many times they reject it, we’ll pass the law just as many times” (RTRS 2022) epitomized obstinate defiance. Victory lay not in legal success but in the performance of endless refusal. For supporters, the repetition itself was symbolic triumph; for opponents, it was proof of deliberate obstruction.

Defiance was not limited to Dodik’s camp. A parallel form surfaced in Sarajevo through protests against rumored OHR electoral reforms. Demonstrators marched under banners such as “We won’t give up the state” and “We want a civic state,” though organizers conceded that few participants knew the technical details of the

proposed changes.³ The slogans signaled less a legal position than an embodied refusal: a rejection of externally imposed restructuring experienced as an assault on sovereignty. While couched in the language of civic statehood, the protests drew overwhelmingly from Bosniak constituencies and functioned as an affective performance of *inat*. Their force lay in dramatizing refusal rather than advancing alternative proposals. In this sense, they mirrored the symbolic logic of Dodik's *agrément* blockade or the RS Assembly's repeated passage of voided property laws: each was a spectacle of obstinacy, a demonstration that dignity meant saying "no" even in the face of futility.

Resentment, meanwhile, worked more slowly, sedimented through history rather than erupting in sudden spectacle. Unlike spite, which thrived in immediate confrontations and theatrical refusals, resentment accumulated through repetition of grievances and selective memory practices. It infused commemorations, speeches, and institutional disputes, ensuring that every present quarrel resonated with older wounds. The Raštani massacre commemoration, for example, underscored Bosniak grievances over decades of neglected recognition (Klix 2022). RS outlets in the same period emphasized Serb narratives of denial and persecution (RTRS 2022), reinforcing a long-standing sense of grievance against international bias. Dodik's defiance of the Constitutional Court resonated because it tapped into resentment toward post-war state structures perceived as externally imposed. Bosniak leaders justified suspicion of Croat demands by recalling wartime betrayals, while Croat parties invoked exclusion from postwar arrangements. Each gesture was amplified by partisan media not as isolated disputes but as continuations of older injustices. In this way, resentment functioned as the slow-burning infrastructure of the campaign's emotional economy, providing the sediment on which spite, pride, and humiliation could flare into more immediate confrontations.

Rather than explosive, like anger, resentment is accumulative, feeding on past humiliations and reinterpreting them as permanent grievances (Nietzsche 1887/1969; Scheler 1912/1994). In Bosnia, resentment functions as a collective inheritance, renewed through ritualized remembrance and selective commemoration. Ahmed's (2004) concept of "sticky signs" resonates here: terms and symbols saturated with past injury, such as betrayal, genocide, and partition, circulate repeatedly, ensuring that resentment remains emotionally charged and that historical events are mapped onto contemporary disputes. In the 2022 election, spite provided immediate satisfac-

3 Author interview, September 2022

ction, while resentment gave it historical weight. Together, they reinforced antagonism, ensuring that symbolic toughness carried more value than policy debate.

4.3 Fear as Background

Although pride, humiliation, spite, and resentment dominated the campaign's explicit rhetoric, fear remained a pervasive background condition. It rarely appeared in isolation, but it primed audiences to respond to other affects. Fear meant not only anxiety about renewed violence but also apprehension over political domination and subjugation.

On the Bosniak side, fear was staged most vividly through campaign videos that dramatized existential threat. The NiP's video, "Da nam Bosna opstane" ("For Bosnia to Survive"), explicitly framed the election as a struggle for survival (NiP 2022). Its pounding marching drums and solemn narration conveyed urgency, warning that "weakness is paid with freedom" and declaring "we will not be slaves." The repeated invocation of mothers, children, and "the weak ones" situated political stakes in visceral terms of familial protection and collective vulnerability. The soundtrack and militarized rhythm positioned the viewer as part of a mobilized community, summoned to defend Bosnia's continued existence.

The SDA's video, *Zemlja ljiljana* ("The Land of Lilies"), employed a similar repertoire of fear, counterposing it with assertive negation (SDA 2022). Set to dramatic music, the video enumerated looming threats: that Bosnia would be partitioned, that rights and freedoms would be stripped, that external villains would "pull the strings," and that mothers would again be forced to hand their sons to death. Each threat was rhythmically countered with the defiant refrain "ne može" ("it will not go"). The structure worked by first evoking fear — images of dismemberment, loss, and death — and then discharging it into a collective denial of vulnerability. The affective power lay not in the warning of catastrophe, but in the ritualized refusal that positioned the SDA as national guardian.

Together, these videos illustrate how the two largest Bosniak parties relied on fear to mobilize their constituencies, constructing a vision of politics in which the stakes were nothing less than national survival. The imagery of children, mothers, partition, and enslavement positioned voting not as a policy choice but as an act of existential defense. By foregrounding danger and dramatizing its rejection, the videos embedded the election in a narrative of perpetual siege, where fear was both the dominant affect and the justification for loyalty.

In Republika Srpska, Dodik's warnings of Western meddling tapped into older memories of NATO bombings, sanctions, and perceived German hostility during World War II. Demographic narratives, whether Bosniak anxieties over emigration or Serb claims of population decline, likewise transformed statistical trends into existential fears. In these framings, numbers became signs of potential disappearance, reinforcing a sense of fragility. By equating the protection of the status of Republika Srpska with the survival of the Serb people, Dodik cast himself as the community's embodied guardian whose posture and defiance stood in for the nation's endurance.

Fear thus functioned less as a central slogan than as the emotional atmosphere in which other affects circulated. Resistance could be framed as uprightness because audiences feared humiliation. Tit-for-tat confrontations gained intensity because anxieties over potential domination made symbolic toughness appear essential. As Bar-Tal (2007) notes, collective fear in protracted conflicts becomes institutionalized as a "societal ethos of conflict," providing a taken-for-granted lens through which all events are interpreted. In the 2022 election, fear rarely appeared as a direct campaign message, but it heightened the resonance of pride, spite, and resentment.

While leading nationalists championed the circulation of fear, pride, and humiliation, opposition actors could not escape this affective terrain. Efforts to redirect the campaign toward governance failures and corruption were repeatedly refracted through the lens of national identity. The Social Democratic Party candidate for the state presidency, Denis Bećirović, frequently amplified themes of threat and defense of Bosnia, at times engaging in discursive outbidding with SDA leader Bakir Izetbegović. In Republika Srpska, opposition parties likewise presented themselves as better defenders of entity autonomy than Dodik, reproducing rather than breaking with nationalist frames.

Although many opposition actors criticized incumbents for neglecting socio-economic reform and the rule of law, their own programs offered few concrete policy alternatives. The civic-oriented Naša stranka was a partial exception, as its platform engaged more extensively with everyday policy questions, including social services and governance reforms (ManipuNacija 2022). Yet such appeals were marginal in the broader emotional economy of the campaign. Policy debates barely registered in the wider public sphere, where symbolic gestures and affective appeals dominated. That Naša stranka secured only a small share of the vote was therefore unsurprising.

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the 2022 election in Bosnia and Herzegovina highlights how political life in deeply divided societies is organized not through rational policy debate but through intersecting emotional economies. Rather than privileging a single affect such as spite, the evidence demonstrates that multiple emotions coexisted and reinforced one another during the campaign. This section reflects on broader implications of these findings.

5.1 Affective Antagonism and the Limits of Agonism

Political theorists, most notably Chantal Mouffe, distinguish between agonism, a mode of democratic contestation in which opponents recognize one another as legitimate adversaries, and antagonism, in which rivals are cast as existential threats. This distinction is analytically useful for interpreting the 2022 campaign because its core dynamics did not revolve around programmatic disagreement but around affective antagonism. Humiliation, dignity claims, fear, resentment, and spite functioned not merely as rhetorical emphases but as emotional mechanisms through which actors rendered their opponents illegitimate or dangerous.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutional fragmentation and ethnonational competition make agonistic relations structurally improbable, since the system rewards leaders who mobilize existential threat and moralized boundaries. Media environments amplify such affective signals, reinforcing the sense that politics is a battle for survival rather than a contest among legitimate rivals. Affective discourse therefore does not simply accompany antagonism but actively reproduces it.

The findings show that elections unfold as contests over moral status, dignity, and symbolic threat rather than debates about governance. Pervasive insecurity, stalled reform, and mass emigration heighten susceptibility to fear and resentment, while political incentives reward leaders who frame politics as existential conflict. From an agonistic perspective, the emotional repertoire on display in 2022 further entrenches antagonism, limiting prospects for rivalry without enmity. These affective structures help explain why Bosnia's electoral politics remain polarized even in the absence of substantial policy disagreement.

5.2 The Interdependence of Affects

A central insight emerging from the campaign is that emotions did not operate in isolation. Fear permeated the atmosphere, orienting communities toward existential insecurity and priming them to interpret disputes as matters of survival. Dignity and pride were mobilized through metaphors of uprightness and rituals of unity, but their appeal derived from the omnipresent shadow of humiliation. Spite gained its force by resonating with humiliation and fear, providing symbolic satisfaction through defiance. Resentment, rooted in selective memory, ensured that grievances of the past remained present, making each provocation appear part of a longer historical continuum.

Ahmed's (2004) argument about the relational "stickiness" of emotions helps explain this interdependence. What mattered in the 2022 campaign was not fear, pride, humiliation, or spite in isolation, but the way they adhered to one another through circulating metaphors, commemorations, and orchestrated crises. The image of "keeping the spine upright" showed how a single bodily metaphor could anchor both Bosniak and Serb claims of dignity, while selective commemorations allowed resentment to flow into present disputes. In this sense, Bosnia's election was structured less by discrete emotional episodes than by constellations of feeling, in which the stickiness of symbols ensured that each affect drew its energy from the others.

5.3 The Reproduction of the Post-Dayton Order

The entanglement of these emotions sheds light on why Bosnia's post-Dayton political order has proven so resilient to change. Institutional design, such as power-sharing formulas, veto points, and ethnic quotas, explains the mechanics of gridlock, but not its affective grip. What ensures that the mechanisms of gridlock will be exercised is the emotional economy cultivated around these structures. Fear primes voters to interpret politics through existential threat. Dignity and pride promise protection of collective worth. Spite and resentment deliver the satisfaction of defiance and the reassurance that old humiliations will not be forgotten. These affects resonate with embodied memories of war, displacement, and insecurity in ways that ensure institutional incentives for perpetuating ethnic polarization will be used.

This emotional economy transforms elections into symbolic contests over recognition rather than evaluations of governance. Leaders need not demonstrate policy competence if they can credibly perform refusal, embody dignity, and ritualize griev-

ances. Spiteful gestures that appear petty in rationalist terms such as blocking an ambassador or re-passing annulled laws, become powerful affirmations of resilience. Proudful commemorations and invocations of uprightness similarly reaffirm communal dignity by dramatizing leaders as indispensable guardians. In this way, emotions are not epiphenomena of Bosnia's ethno-political order but its constitutive forces. They reproduce antagonism, legitimize incumbents, and stabilize a system that otherwise appears dysfunctional.

5.4 The Paradox of Civic Appeals

What appeared as civic alternatives in the 2022 campaign ultimately reinforced rather than transcended Bosnia's ethnic polarization. Calls for a "civic state," though framed in universalist terms, were overwhelmingly advanced within Bosniak-majority contexts. For many Bosniaks, civic discourse carries the promise of equality and emancipation from ethnic partition. Yet for Serb and Croat parties, the same language is interpreted as a veiled assertion of Bosniak dominance, and an attempt to outvote minorities by imposing majoritarianism. In this way, the very idiom of civic politics becomes a sticky sign of threat, rather than an opening for cross-ethnic solidarity.

A long-standing exploitation of civic rhetoric by Bosnian Croat presidency member Željko Komšić illustrates this paradox. While presenting himself as the champion of all Bosnians, his electoral support has consistently derived largely from Bosniak voters. This disconnect makes his universalist language appear hollow to rivals, legitimizing the argument that civic discourse functions as ethnic outbidding in another guise. In 2022, Komšić campaigned under the slogan "Za Građansku Državu" ("For a Civic State"), invoking the positive affective resonance of civic equality among Bosniak audiences while offering almost no concrete proposals for realizing such a vision. The result is that appeals to a "civic state" merely reproduced antagonisms, transforming what might appear as an alternative register into yet another marker of division.

As affective politics research shows, emotions are rarely neutral containers of meaning. Even when they appear aspirational, their circulation is conditioned by entrenched histories and positionalities (Halperin & Gross 2011). In Bosnia, civic appeals were not immune to this dynamic. They were absorbed into the same emotional economy that animates nationalist politics, intensifying resentment and suspicion rather than opening new horizons. This paradox reveals the structural weakness of

civic discourse in the Bosnian context. Rather than offering a way out, it too often becomes fuel for the very fire it seeks to extinguish.

6. CONCLUSION

This analysis of the 2022 election in Bosnia and Herzegovina underscores the benefits of analyzing elections in divided societies as affective contests. The campaign was saturated not by policy debate but by the circulation of an interconnected emotional constellation of spite, fear, pride, dignity, humiliation, and resentment. This affective interplay also helps explain why Bosnia's consociational order endures. Institutional design provides incentives for ethnic outbidding, but its effectiveness depends on emotional resonance. Leaders who dramatize defiance, embody dignity, or rehearse grievances secure loyalty not because they deliver governance outcomes but because they satisfy deeply rooted affective needs.

For comparative research, the Bosnian case shows that emotions should not be reduced to secondary distortions of institutional politics. They are co-constitutive of political order as the very fuel that makes institutional incentives resonate with voters. Understanding elections in divided contexts requires tracing how emotional repertoires are orchestrated, circulated, and ritualized. Only by engaging these affective infrastructures can scholars and practitioners grasp the persistence of antagonism, and the difficulty of building political alternatives that do not collapse back into the same emotional scripts.

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USPRAVNE KIČME I LJEPLJIVI ZNAKOVI: AFEKTIVNA POLITIKA U PREDIZBORNOJ KAMPANJI U BIH 2022

Sažetak:

Izbori u Bosni i Hercegovini (BiH) dosljedno se oblikuju emotivno nabijenim sporovima ukorijenjenim u etnonacionalnim podjelama. Ovaj članak analizira Opće izbore 2022. kroz prizmu afektivne politike. Oslanjajući se na sistematsko praćenje medijskog izvještavanja razmatra glavne i stranački povezane medije kako bi mapirao načine na koje su politički lideri i partijski mediji mobilizirali strah, inat, ogorčenost, poniženje, ponos i dostojanstvo radi homogenizacije vlastitih biračkih baza i delegitamacije protivnika. Umjesto da nastupaju kao izolirani ispadi, ovi afekti su kružili kroz prepoznatljive repertoar imenovanja, komemorativnih prizivanja prošlih nepravdi i koreografisane demonstracije prkosa. Analiza pokazuje kako su se različiti afekti uvezivali u uzajamno pojačavajuće obrasce koji su istiskivali raspravu o javnim politikama i stabilizirali antagonistička očekivanja među zajednicama. Iako su konkretni signali i mete varirali po strankama i regijama, temeljna "afektivna gramatika" bila je zajednička, što pomaže objasniti postojanost glasanja po blokovima i ograničen domet prekoetničkih poruka. Konceptualno, članak povezuje teoriju afekta i analizu diskursa kako bi operacionalizirao "afektivne repertoare" u izbornim kontekstima. Empirijski, pokazuje kako ti repertoari održavaju adversarijalne strukture i u uslovima formalnog demokratskog natjecanja.

Ključne riječi: Bosna i Hercegovina; izbori; afektivna politika; analiza diskursa

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