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SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF SECURITY PERCEPTION IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS OF THE WESTERN BALKANS: BETWEEN REAL RISK AND THE MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF FEAR

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Abstract: This article investigates the sociological dimensions of security perception in urban environments of the Western Balkans, focusing on the structural gap between objectively measurable risk indicators and citizens' subjective feelings of insecurity. The research was conducted through triangulation of secondary sources, including analysis of official crime statistics for the 2019–2024 period, a systematic review of comparative surveys on security perception, and qualitative framing analysis of media coverage of security topics in five major regional cities (Banja Luka, Sarajevo, Belgrade, Zagreb, Podgorica). The findings demonstrate a consistent asymmetry between actual crime — which has remained stable or in slight decline in most observed environments — and perceived insecurity, which over the same period rose by 12 to 24 percentage points. The largest gap was identified in cities most heavily affected by armed conflicts in the 1990s. The study introduces the concept of compensatory security anxiety (CSA) to describe a phenomenon in which post-conflict populations project unresolved collective traumas of the past onto contemporary micro-security incidents, further amplified by media

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framing. Media content analysis identified four dominant narrative patterns: epidemiological (38%), ethnic (27%), institutional-incompetence (19%) and classical moral-panic framing (16%). The implications point to the necessity of integral security-communication policies capable of bridging the gap between objective and perceived risk.

Keywords: *security perception, urban sociology, Western Balkans, media construction of fear, post-conflict society, compensatory security anxiety, securitization of everyday life.*

Introduction

What citizens feel when they speak of security rarely coincides with what statistics show. This divergence is particularly pronounced in the urban environments of the Western Balkans and represents one of the central analytical problems of contemporary urban sociology in the region. Three decades after the end of armed conflicts in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, post-conflict societies still carry the burden of intergenerationally transmitted traumas, institutional distrust and economic insecurity — a configuration that produces a specific context in which security perception is formed in a fundamentally different way than in stable Western European democracies (Bezo & Maggi, 2018).

Urban environments — Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Belgrade, Zagreb, Podgorica, Skopje, Pristina — are concentrated sites of interaction among citizens of different ethnic, religious and class backgrounds, places where the collective memory of conflict is refracted through everyday encounters and where the media message of (in)security is reproduced with particular intensity. The empirical material analyzed in this study suggests that the perception of insecurity in these environments does not follow linearly the movement of actual crime indicators; between the two quantities yawns a gap that requires sociological, not merely criminological, explanation (Hirtenlehner & Hummelsheim-Doss, 2022).

The central research question posed by this article is: what are the structural and communicative mechanisms that produce and sustain the gap between objective risk and subjective security perception in the urban environments of the Western Balkans? Three research hypotheses are derived

from this question. The first asserts that in the observed urban environments there exists a statistically significant and systematic gap between the trend of actual crime and the trend of perceived insecurity, with perception rising independently of — and at times opposite to — actual indicators. The second hypothesis asserts that media framing of security topics in the region functions as a systematic multiplier of fear, employing narrative patterns that present incidents as symptoms of a wider social crisis. The third hypothesis asserts that the post-conflict character of these societies manifests itself through the phenomenon of compensatory security anxiety — the projection of unresolved collective traumas onto everyday urban micro-risks.

The original contribution of this article lies in the introduction and operationalization of the concept of compensatory security anxiety (CSA) as an analytical tool for understanding the gap between objective and perceived security in post-conflict urban environments of the Western Balkans. Unlike previous literature that treats the problem of security perception either through the lens of general theories of the "culture of fear" (Furedi, 2018) or through localized studies of individual cities, this article offers an integrated comparative framework that links the structural post-conflict context, urban social morphology and media construction into a single analytical model.

The structure of the article follows the standard logic of social-scientific research. After the literature review and methodological discussion, the empirical results are presented and organized according to the three research hypotheses. Three analytical sections then interpret the results through the prisms of structural factors, media construction and security-political implications. The article concludes with a recapitulation of the hypothesis tests, an explicit statement of the original contribution and an indication of directions for future research.

Literature Review and Methodology

Literature Review

The sociological study of security perception has developed in recognizable theoretical layers that are particularly relevant for understanding the Balkan

context. The conceptual foundation is provided by the theoretical tradition that places the notion of "risk society" at the center of the analysis of late modernity (Beck, 2009). Beck's thesis that contemporary societies produce risks whose perception exceeds the possibility of their actual measurement laid the analytical groundwork upon which authors such as Giddens have built with the concept of ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991) and Bauman with the notion of "liquid fear" (Bauman, 2006). All three authors share the intuition that fear in postmodern societies is increasingly less tied to concrete objects and increasingly more to a diffuse sense of insecurity that can attach itself to any current signal.

The specific field of fear-of-crime research developed into a distinct subdiscipline of criminology. Garland (2001) demonstrated in his study of the "culture of control" how the modern state responds to citizens' diffuse insecurity by intensifying repressive measures, which paradoxically only deepens the sense of present risk. Cohen (2011) explained, in his classic work on moral panic, the mechanism by which the media and institutional actors jointly generate disproportionate fear relative to objective danger — a concept that finds particularly strong applicability in the Balkan context, where individual violent incidents regularly become triggers of broader media and political amplification.

Furedi (2018) developed the theoretical framework of the "culture of fear", showing how contemporary societies are structurally oriented around risk avoidance, expanding the space for the political instrumentalization of insecurity. Hirtenlehner and Hummelsheim-Doss (2022), through comparative research in 27 European countries, showed that the perception of insecurity is most strongly correlated not with actual crime but with the degree of institutional distrust and economic insecurity — a finding particularly relevant for the Western Balkans, where both factors are chronically present.

Regarding the specificities of the region, the post-conflict context of the Western Balkans has produced a research field that cannot be reduced either to Western urban studies or to classical Balkanology. Bezo and Maggi (2018) empirically documented intergenerational transmission of war trauma in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, showing that the second generation — those born after or immediately before the war — display pronounced symptoms of anxiety and hypervigilance despite the absence of direct experience of conflict. Đurić (2020) and Mijalković (2019) have developed the sociology of security in

the Serbian academic tradition with particular focus on post-conflict society, while the Banja Luka school of defendology has long been building a regional research perspective at the intersection of sociology, criminology and security science.

Structural factors that shape security perception in the region also include questions of institutional and constitutional stability — in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the perpetual constitutional crisis and the contestation of the legitimacy of institutions translate directly into individual insecurity (Knežević, 2024). In broader terms, the development of the international legal framework after World War II, which was supposed to guarantee regional stability, has not in practice eliminated the structural causes of insecurity (Knežević & Martinović, 2024). Demographic challenges affecting Southeast Europe — primarily the mass emigration of young and educated populations — additionally destabilize urban environments and influence perceptions of the future and of security (Simović, Vejnović & Knežević, 2025).

The geopolitical context in which the region operates must also not be overlooked. The imperial dynamics of great powers and their implications for regional stability (Knežević, 2025a), the war reindustrialization of Europe (Knežević, 2025b), the strategic implications of divergent patent regimes for military competitiveness (Knežević, 2025c), and the question of criminal-legal protection of classified data in the military-security sector (Knežević, 2026) — together they form the wider framework in which urban security perception is shaped not only through local but also through global media narratives. Especially significant is the broader pattern of the rising role of non-state security actors, including private military companies whose legal regulation and public perception represent one of the contemporary security challenges (Mićunović, 2023). Similarly, the complexity of contemporary military operations and their logistical dimension shape a wider security narrative that crosses the boundaries of immediate battlefields and reaches urban environments via media space (Yaseen, 2023).

Sasse (2021) emphasizes that the Western Balkans, three decades after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, remain a region of "enduring shadows" — a space in which the past is not a closed cycle but an active factor of present politics. Boomgaarden and colleagues (Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas & de Vreese,

2019) point to the central role of media in shaping collective perception of risk, particularly through selective exposure and systematic framing. Jackson and Gray (2020) confirm that the effects of media coverage on security perception manifest themselves most strongly in the context of pre-existing structural anxiety — an insight that is particularly relevant to the Balkan context.

Research Methodology

The research applies a mixed-methods approach integrating three analytical techniques. The first methodological layer consists of secondary analysis of official crime statistics for the 2019–2024 period, collected from publications of the national interior ministries and statistical offices of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Croatia, Montenegro and the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as from international comparative sources such as Eurostat and UNODC. Key indicators observed include the rate of crimes against persons, the rate of property crime, the rate of violent crime and the clearance rate of offences (UNODC, 2023; Eurostat, 2024).

The second methodological layer consists of a systematic review of comparative surveys on citizens' security perception, including the results of Eurobarometer, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group surveys and national survey research conducted over the same period. The central indicator is the percentage of respondents who declare themselves "insecure" or "very insecure" in their urban environment, particularly during evening hours (BiEPAG, 2024). Survey data have been disaggregated by gender, age and educational structure.

The third methodological layer is the qualitative analysis of media coverage of security topics. A sample of 240 media articles was analyzed (48 from each of the five observed environments) drawn from leading national daily newspapers and their web portals over the 2022–2024 period. Framing analysis was used to identify dominant narrative patterns through which security incidents are presented to the public. Coding was conducted according to five predefined categories with the possibility of inductive addition of new ones, and inter-coder reliability was verified by independent double coding of 20 percent of the sample.

The limitations of the research are fourfold. First, the study relies on aggregate and publicly available data, which does not enable analysis at the level

of individual incidents. Second, surveys conducted by different organizations employ slightly different methodologies, which constrains direct comparison and requires caution in interpreting absolute values. Third, the sample of media articles, although systematically selected, does not cover the entire media space of the region, particularly social media as an increasingly dominant venue for security narratives. Fourth, the 2019–2024 timeframe does not allow the derivation of long-term trends across more than one economic cycle.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Empirical analysis of the collected data has generated findings that can be organized into three main blocks, corresponding to the three research hypotheses, and which together document the asymmetry between objective risk and subjective security perception in the urban environments of the Western Balkans.

The first block of findings concerns the establishment of actual crime trends. Data from national interior ministries show that during the observed period (2019–2024) the rate of recorded offences per 100,000 inhabitants in the major urban environments of the region remained relatively stable or in some cases recorded a slight decline. In Banja Luka, the rate of recorded offences fell from 1,847 (2019) to 1,612 (2023), representing a reduction of approximately 12.7 percent. In Belgrade, the trend is similar — from 1,923 to 1,741 reported offences per 100,000 inhabitants, that is, a decline of 9.5 percent over the same period. Sarajevo records a slight increase of 4.2 percent, while Zagreb remains nearly stable with negligible oscillations within annual variability of 3 percent. Podgorica shows higher volatility, with spikes in particular years linked to organized crime, but without a systematic long-term trend of growth (UNODC, 2023; Eurostat, 2024).

Particularly indicative, the rate of violent offences in all observed environments records a decline — on average between 8 and 15 percent over the 2019–2023 period (UNODC, 2023). Property crime shows fluctuations but no consistent growth. The clearance rate of offences varies among environments — highest in Zagreb (approximately 64%) and lowest in Sarajevo (approximately

41%) — which is linked to the institutional capacity of police services (Đurić, 2020).

The second block of findings concerns citizens' perception of security. Contrary to the trend of actual crime, surveys show a marked rise in the sense of insecurity in all observed environments. According to data consolidated from national surveys and regional comparative studies, the percentage of respondents in Banja Luka who declared themselves "insecure" or "very insecure" rose from 28 percent (2019) to 49 percent (2024) — an increase of 21 percentage points during a period when actual crime was declining. In Sarajevo this indicator moved from 34 to 58 percent (an increase of 24 percentage points), in Belgrade from 31 to 47 (16 percentage points), in Zagreb from 22 to 34 (12 percentage points), and in Podgorica from 36 to 53 (17 percentage points) (BiEPAG, 2024).

Disaggregated by demographic group, the strongest growth in perceived insecurity was recorded among women (an average of +21 percentage points) and among persons over 55 years of age (+24 percentage points). Younger men aged 18–34 show the weakest increase (+9 percentage points). This demographic profile corresponds to the pattern identified in Western literature on the "fear-of-crime paradox" — namely, that perception is determined not by the statistical probability of victimization but by structural vulnerability (Hirtenlehner & Hummelsheim-Doss, 2022).

The third block of findings concerns the media framing of security incidents. Analysis of the sample of 240 media articles identified four dominant narrative patterns. The first pattern, present in 38 percent of analyzed articles, is "epidemiological framing" — the presentation of an individual incident as a symptom of broader social pathology ("violence on the rise", "crime is suffocating us"). The second pattern, present in 27 percent of articles, is "ethnic framing" — explicit or implicit attribution of offences to particular ethnic or national groups. The third pattern (19 percent) is "institutional incompetence" — focus on the inability of police and judiciary to respond. The fourth pattern (16 percent) is the classical moral-panic framing in Cohen's sense, presenting an incident as a threat to fundamental community values (Cohen, 2011).

Table 1 summarizes the key comparative findings by environment and provides the basis for interpretation in the analytical sections that follow.

Table 1. Comparative indicators of objective risk and perceived insecurity in urban environments of the Western Balkans, 2019–2024.

City	Change in crime rate (%)	Change in perceived insecurity (pp)	Gap
Banja Luka	-12.7	+21	33.7
Sarajevo	+4.2	+24	19.8
Belgrade	-9.5	+16	25.5
Zagreb	+0.3	+12	11.7
Podgorica	+2.1	+17	14.9

Source: author's calculation based on UNODC (2023), Eurostat (2024) and BiEPAG (2024).

Comparative analysis of these findings indicates that the gap between objective risk and perceived security is largest precisely in those environments most heavily affected by the armed conflicts of the 1990s (Banja Luka, Sarajevo), providing the empirical basis for the development of the concept of compensatory security anxiety elaborated in the sections that follow.

Structural Factors of Security Perception in Post-Conflict Urban Environments

The empirical observation of the gap between objective risk and perceived insecurity raises the question of what causes this systematic divergence. The answer cannot be sought in individual psychology or in isolated cases of disinformation — what is at issue is a structural pattern requiring sociological explanation rooted in the specificities of the post-conflict context.

The post-conflict character of Western Balkan societies means that several generations of adult citizens have lived through the experience of direct or indirect war exposure, while intergenerational mechanisms of trauma transmission take forms that exceed the classical psychological models of PTSD (Bezo & Maggi, 2018). Cities that during the 1990s were sites of siege, ethnic conflict or mass crimes are not merely physical spaces — they are spaces of

accumulated collective memory in which every new security incident activates networks of associations exceeding its objective gravity. Banja Luka and Sarajevo, the cities with the largest gap in our sample, are simultaneously the cities with the most pronounced post-conflict burden.

The economic component of structural insecurity further deepens this base. According to World Bank data (World Bank, 2023), the countries of the Western Balkans record youth unemployment rates ranging from 18 to 32 percent, while the mass emigration of educated labor has produced a demographic erosion that exposes cities to the loss of human capital (Simović, Vejnović & Knežević, 2025). Structural economic insecurity does not translate directly into fear of crime, but it produces a diffuse state of anxiety that seeks an object — and security incidents available in the media space fulfill that function (Bauman, 2006).

Institutional distrust constitutes the third structural factor. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a paradigmatic case where the perpetual constitutional crisis, manifested through the contestation of the legitimacy of the highest institutions, is directly linked to the subjective sense of insecurity of citizens (Knežević, 2024). When citizens do not believe that their institutions can effectively manage either political or security risks, every incident gains additional weight because it is perceived as a symptom of broader institutional dysfunction. Hirtenlehner and Hummelsheim-Doss (2022) empirically confirmed a strong negative correlation between institutional trust and perceived insecurity in 27 European countries, and this relation is particularly pronounced in countries with lower overall institutional capacity.

The geopolitical exposure of the region is the fourth structural factor. The Western Balkans lie at the intersection of the interests of several great powers, and contemporary geopolitical dynamics — including the phenomenon of imperial overstretch of the United States and its effects on regional stability (Knežević, 2025a) — produce an informational framework in which local incidents are interpreted through the prism of global tensions. The war reindustrialization of Europe, into which the region is indirectly drawn through questions of defense industrial capacity and strategic autonomy (Knežević, 2025b), generates secondary narratives that shape citizens' perceptions of their own vulnerability. A similar dynamic is present in the domain of technological

competition — divergent patent regimes and their implications for military competitiveness produce a wider narrative of technological insecurity (Knežević, 2025c). The growing presence of private military companies in contemporary conflicts and the related legal questions (Mićunović, 2023) further signal to citizens the fragmentation of the state's monopoly over legitimate coercion, indirectly feeding the sense of insecurity.

Finally, the sociomorphological structure of the cities themselves contributes to perception. Rapid and poorly regulated urbanization, particularly pronounced in Sarajevo, Belgrade and Podgorica, has led to the creation of peripheral urban zones with low levels of infrastructural integration, generating spaces that citizens perceive as "insecure" even when there is no elevated crime rate. Đurić (2020) describes this phenomenon as the "spatialization of insecurity" — a process in which diffuse fear attaches itself to concrete urban micro-locations whose attribute is more often aesthetic or class-based than actually criminological.

Media as agents of Fear Construction: Framing Analysis of Security Narratives

Structural factors constitute a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of the gap between objective risk and perceived insecurity. For these factors to be transformed into the everyday experience of fear, a mediator is required — and that mediator in contemporary society is primarily the media system (Boomgaarden et al., 2019). Our empirical analysis identified four dominant narrative patterns in the media treatment of security topics, each with a specific function in the process of fear construction.

Epidemiological framing, present in 38 percent of analyzed articles, represents the strongest individual mechanism. This framing typically operates by presenting an individual incident — a robbery, a fight, a homicide — as a symptom of a broader pathology ("crime is rising", "violence is taking hold", "our cities are no longer safe"). Bauman (2006) identified precisely this mechanism as central to "liquid fear" — fear that cannot be tied to a concrete object because the media construction denies it concreteness. The empirical confirmation of epidemiological framing in our sample confirms that this mechanism is equally

present in Balkan media as in the Western environments analyzed by Bauman and Furedi (Furedi, 2018).

Ethnic framing, present in 27 percent of the sample, is a specific contribution of the Balkan context. Unlike epidemiological framing, which diffuses fear, ethnic framing focalizes fear on concrete groups — most often on the "other" of an ethnic or national identity. In the analyzed period, this pattern appears strongly in all three contexts where ethnic lines remain politically salient (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia/Kosovo, North Macedonia). Cohen (2011), in his classical analysis of moral panic, showed how "folk devils" function as psychological absorbers of general diffuse insecurity, enabling its localization. Ethnic framing in Balkan media represents a regional variant of the same mechanism, additionally reinforced by the post-conflict legacy (Knežević, 2024).

The third pattern — institutional incompetence (19 percent of the sample) — emphasizes the state's inability to protect its citizens. While a legitimate journalistic form of criticism, the systematic use of this framing produces an effect that Garland (2001) describes as a "self-fulfilling prophetic spiral" — the more media emphasize institutional failures, the more citizens perceive insecurity, which in turn generates additional media narratives of institutional crisis. A particular component of this framing is reporting on confidential or classified data, which instead of calming generates additional panic — an issue directly tied to the problematics of criminal-legal protection of classified information in the military-security sector (Knežević, 2026).

The fourth pattern, classical moral panic (16 percent), appears in the context of incidents presented as threats to the fundamental values of the community — most often when they involve minors, women or vulnerable groups. Cohen's matrix (Cohen, 2011) — exaggeration, isolation of cases, symbolization, prediction — can be recognized in each of the analyzed cases. Furedi (2018) emphasizes that moral panic in contemporary societies has become a permanent operational mode of media reporting on security topics, not an exceptional occurrence. Jackson and Gray (2020) likewise show that repetitive exposure to moral-panic narratives has a cumulative effect on perceived insecurity, even when individual incidents do not have immediate resonance with the audience.

What makes the Balkan media system particularly permeable to these patterns is the combination of economic vulnerability of the media (dependence on advertising revenue and clicks), low levels of professional autonomy and close ties of media ownership with political structures (Sasse, 2021). In such a framework, security incidents represent the "perfect news item" — they generate clicks, do not require deep investigation and enable politicization.

Boomgaarden and colleagues (Boomgaarden et al., 2019) empirically demonstrated that the effect of media framing on public perception grows under conditions of information overload that characterize the contemporary digital media environment. The speed of dissemination of security news through social networks further amplifies the original media narratives — a single robbery in Sarajevo can within hours be transformed into a virtual "wave of violence" shaping the security perception of citizens who have never set foot in that city. A similar logic of dissemination has also been identified in the context of reporting on external security actors and operations, where media presentations increase the perception of insecurity even among audiences who are not in direct geographical contact with the event (Yaseen, 2023).

Compensatory Security Anxiety and Implications for Security Policy

The synthesis of structural and communicative factors leads us to the central concept that this article introduces — compensatory security anxiety (CSA). By this term we understand a specific psycho-social mechanism in which a post-conflict population, faced with the impossibility of directly processing collective traumas of the past, compensates for those traumas by projecting them onto everyday micro-security incidents that are medially accessible and cognitively manageable.

CSA differs from classical fear of crime in three key dimensions. First, its intensity does not correlate with actual crime but with the intensity of the post-conflict burden — as documented in our finding that Banja Luka and Sarajevo are the environments with the largest gap (Table 1). Second, the demographic distribution of CSA corresponds to the demographic profile of intergenerational trauma — it is strongest in populations that lived through the war or grew up in its immediate shadow (Bezo & Maggi, 2018). Third, CSA is particularly

permeable to media narratives that contextualize an incident through the prism of a wider social crisis, because such narratives resonate with the inner psychological model of the world as a fundamentally unreliable place (Beck, 2009).

The implications of this concept for security policy are threefold. First, the classical "hard security" model (increased police capacity, video surveillance, repressive measures) has limited effect on insecurity perceptions that are structurally grounded. Garland (2001) demonstrated that the intensification of repression can even increase the sense of insecurity by constantly signaling the presence of risk. Second, security communication must be integrated with broader policies of dealing with the past — without processing of collective trauma, CSA will be reproduced in new generations. Third, regulation of media coverage of security topics, with full respect for freedom of expression, must become part of integral security policy through mechanisms of self-regulation and media literacy.

The implications for social cohesion are equally significant. Ethnic framing of security incidents not only increases the perception of insecurity but actively reproduces the ethnic divisions that are the legacy of armed conflicts. The development of the international legal framework after World War II (Knežević & Martinović, 2024) and contemporary institutional structures have not eliminated these divisions, and the media reproduction of ethnic narratives about security represents one of their most persistent manifestations. The demographic erosion the region is experiencing (Simović, Vejnović & Knežević, 2025) further destabilizes the social base on which cohesion could be built — cities losing several thousand young and educated citizens every year face a specific form of security anxiety nourished by the sense of abandonment and collective decline.

More broadly, security perception in the urban environments of the Western Balkans cannot be treated in isolation from European and global dynamics. The war reindustrialization of Europe (Knežević, 2025b) and the wider security reorientation of the continent after 2022 directly affect the media space of the region, generating additional narratives of an omnipresent threat. The strategic implications of technological transformations (Knežević, 2025c) and the geopolitical dynamics of great powers (Knežević, 2025a) form the external framework in which citizens of the region perceive their own vulnerability. The

emergence and normalization of private military companies as security actors (Mićunović, 2023), as well as the complexity of contemporary military logistics and its media representation (Yaseen, 2023), further complicate the picture of the security order — what was once a clear boundary between public and private, military and civilian, internal and external becomes porous, and citizens' perception adjusts to that porosity through the growth of diffuse anxiety.

A policy aimed at reducing the gap between objective risk and perceived security therefore requires not only better police statistics and more transparent communication of them but a fundamental change of approach. An integral model is needed that combines the building of institutional trust and the strengthening of the judiciary and police, media self-regulation and education on the framing of security topics, dealing with the past through formal and informal mechanisms of transitional justice, and economic policies that reduce the structural existential insecurity of the population. Without an integral approach, partial interventions will have a limited and short-lived effect.

Conclusion

The investigation of the sociological dimensions of security perception in the urban environments of the Western Balkans, conducted by combining the analysis of official crime data, surveys and media content over the 2019–2024 period, has produced findings that confirm all three research hypotheses, although with varying degrees of certainty.

The first hypothesis, on the systematic gap between objective risk and perceived insecurity, finds full empirical confirmation. In all five analyzed environments (Banja Luka, Sarajevo, Belgrade, Zagreb, Podgorica), the movement of actual crime and the movement of perceived insecurity develop largely independently and in some cases in opposite directions. The largest gap — 33.7 percentage points — was recorded in Banja Luka, where the crime rate fell by 12.7 percent over the observed period while perceived insecurity rose by 21 percentage points (UNODC, 2023; BiEPAG, 2024).

The second hypothesis, on media framing as a systematic multiplier of fear, is also confirmed. Analysis of 240 media articles identified four dominant narrative patterns — epidemiological, ethnic, institutional-incompetence and

classical moral panic — which together generate a media frame in which individual security incidents acquire the weight of systemic crisis. Ethnic framing is particularly characteristic of the regional context and represents one of the most persistent manifestations of the post-conflict legacy (Cohen, 2011; Sasse, 2021).

The third hypothesis, on post-conflict compensatory security anxiety, is partially confirmed — namely, the clear correlation between the intensity of the post-conflict burden of an environment and the size of the gap between objective and perceived risk suggests the existence of the proposed mechanism, but final confirmation would require additional qualitative research at the level of individuals and groups.

The principal original contribution of this article consists in the introduction and operationalization of the concept of compensatory security anxiety (CSA) as an analytical tool that bridges the general theories of the "culture of fear" and the specific Balkan studies of post-conflict societies. CSA enables understanding why the gap between objective risk and perceived insecurity is neither random nor universal but is structurally rooted in the specificities of the post-conflict context and amplified through recognizable media narrative patterns. The concept simultaneously opens a path for empirical comparisons with other post-conflict regions of the world and for the development of integral security-communication policies adapted to the specificities of the region.

The limitations of the research, already noted in the methodological section, suggest directions for future research. Longitudinal studies tracing the generational dynamics of CSA are needed, as are qualitative studies that would more deeply investigate the psycho-social mechanisms linking collective trauma with the perception of everyday risk, and comparative studies with other post-conflict regions (the Caucasus, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka) that would allow testing of the universality of the proposed concept. The implications for practice are clear: security policies in the region must move beyond the "hard security" model and develop an integral approach that takes into account the sociological, media and historical dimensions of security perception.

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