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Crisis Complicates Peacebuilding in Postconflict Societies: COVID-19 Support Triggers Negative Outgroup Emotions Among Individuals With Low and High Prejudice

Islam Borinca¹, Eva Moreno-Bella², Ángel Sánchez-Rodríguez³, and Orla Muldoon⁴

¹ School of Psychology, University College Dublin

² Department of Psychology, University of Córdoba

³ Department of Social Psychology and Anthropology, University of Salamanca

⁴ Department of Psychology, University of Limerick

Despite research on intergroup relations showing that prejudice influences the effect of intergroup help on outgroup empathy, less is known about the interplay of prejudice and intergroup help on outgroup emotions, trust, and perceptions in postconflict societies, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, we examined whether outgroup prejudice moderates the effect of outgroup help with fighting COVID-19 on intergroup affect and intergroup perception. In two studies ($N_{\text{total}} = 811$), participants with low prejudice exhibited more negative intergroup emotions and perceptions (i.e., perceived outgroup dominance) and less outgroup trust when the outgroup's country (i.e., a former opponent) had supported their country in fighting the pandemic than when it had supported another country or when support had been exchanged between other countries. In addition, participants with high prejudice exhibited more negative intergroup emotions and perceptions and less outgroup trust in all experimental conditions and perceived outgroup dominance explained the observed effects for participants with low prejudice. This article discusses what these results imply for theory and practice concerning postconflict intergroup relations.

Public Significance Statement

This research clarifies how people in postconflict societies react to receiving help from former opponents. In two studies, individuals with low prejudice had less trust and more negative emotions and perceptions regarding the outgroup after receiving outgroup help than in two control conditions. In addition, individuals with high prejudice had those same emotions, perceptions, and levels of trust whether the outgroup had offered help or not, which indicates their largely fixed negative views on the outgroup.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, outgroup prejudice, intergroup help, intergroup relations, intergroup affect

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Islam Borinca  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2994-0998>

ISLAM BORINCA, PhD, is an assistant professor in the School of Psychology, University College Dublin, Ireland. His research examines intergroup relations, help, contact, and group norms, focusing on emotions, empathy, dehumanization, metadehumanization, intergroup apologies, prejudice, and discrimination in hostile and nonhostile contexts.

EVA MORENO-BELLA, PhD, currently works at the University of Córdoba, Spain. Her main research topic is the effect of economic inequality on social perception. She is also interested in social class, political participation, and intergroup relations.

ÁNGEL SÁNCHEZ-RODRÍGUEZ, PhD, is currently a lecturer at the University of Salamanca (USAL), Spain, since February 2020. His main line of research has focused on the psychosocial consequences of inequality.

ORLA MULDOON, PhD, is a social and political psychologist and founding professor of psychology at the University of Limerick, Ireland. Her research concerns how group memberships and social identities affect health and

well-being.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Islam Borinca, School of Psychology, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland. Email: islam.borinca@ucd.ie

The perceived severity of the COVID-19 pandemic—that is, the current global crisis caused by a novel coronavirus-induced disease (World Health Organization, 2020)—has been associated with a spike in irrational beliefs about outgroups, or what is known as *outgroup prejudice* (Croucher et al., 2020; Reny & Barreto, 2022), and a strong desire to maintain social distance from them (Esses & Hamilton, 2021). As to why the pandemic has heightened negative affect and reactions toward outgroups (Gómez, 2020) and even undermined intergroup help and solidarity (Greenaway, 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2020), crises and other threatening times (e.g., the 1918 influenza pandemic and the Great Recession) tend to activate imagery of wartime such that citizens identify an enemy (i.e., the outgroup) against which to defend the ingroup (Fritsche et al., 2017; Sabucedo et al., 2020). Such tendencies are also likely to emerge in postconflict societies, where an armed conflict has ended but relations between groups remain tense, and prejudice, as an outgroup expectation, is shaped and reinforced by cultural beliefs, group-based emotions, and episodes of intergroup violence (Adler et al., 2022; Bar-Tal, 2007). Indeed, in postconflict societies, individuals may attempt to direct their hostility toward their former opponents to establish a sense of control and reduce their negative affect (Glick, 2002; Rothschild et al., 2012).

Taken together, the above findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified people's negative perceptions of and intentions toward outgroup members as well as undermined intergroup help and solidarity. Despite the significance of these trends for intergroup relations, research to date has insufficiently examined how the interplay of prejudice and help impacts outgroup emotions and perceptions during the pandemic in postconflict societies. Thus, to investigate the particular processes underlying these effects, we conducted two studies in the postconflict context of Kosovo to examine whether prejudice influences how people feel about and perceive outgroup help—to be specific, how Albanians react when Serbia offers support with combating COVID-19.

The Effect of Prejudice and Help on Emotions, Perceptions, and Trust

Research has shown that *outgroup help*—that is, help offered by an outgroup—can convey genuine compassion (Borinca et al., 2020; Dovidio et al., 2006; Nadler et al., 2009) and may even aid in reconciling strained intergroup relations (Gergen et al., 1975; van Leeuwen & Zagefka, 2017). In postconflict societies, however, unresolved offenses exchanged between groups frequently result in negative expectations and perceptions (Borinca, Tropp, & Oforu, 2021). They also reinforce psychological barriers to positive intergroup reactions and reconciliation that may increase during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Indeed, in postconflict societies, people have more negative perceptions of help provided by former enemies than by other groups, because the enemy's offer of help triggers them to perceive negative outgroup intentions—for example, to dominate or control them—and thus experience more negative emotions (Halabi et al., 2011; Nadler, 1998; Schneider et al., 1996).

Of particular relevance to the present research, Borinca, Falomir-Pichastor, Andrighetto, and Durante (2021; Studies 2 and 3) have demonstrated that, in postconflict societies, individuals with both low and high prejudice displayed ingroup bias regarding social emotions (i.e., empathy) underlying acts of help, which highlights

the interaction effect between prejudice and intergroup help. Even though that effect was less prominent among individuals with low prejudice, both they and their counterparts with high prejudice attributed less empathy and more ulterior motives to outgroup members' offers of assistance, as well as had less favorable expectations of such help, than offers from ingroup members (i.e., control condition). That outcome is consistent with past findings highlighting that even individuals with low or high levels of prejudice may harbor negative feelings and beliefs about the outgroup due to social forces and circumstances that lead to bias (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986, 2004).

Beyond that, findings from conflict-ridden contexts suggest that recipients of help regard the outgroup's acts of assistance as a paternalistic mechanism designed to increase their subordination to and dependency on the outgroup, or *outgroup dominance*, and decrease their self-efficacy (Halabi et al., 2008; Halabi & Nadler, 2010; Jackman, 1994). For example, a study in the Jewish–Arab context of Israel revealed that Israeli Arabs viewed aid from Israeli Jews as a means to bolster their dominance over ingroup members (Halabi et al., 2016). Also relevant in the context of receiving outgroup help is *trust* (Nadler et al., 2008), defined as having positive expectations about others' motives (Sinaceur, 2010). Indeed, in conflict-ridden contexts, people often respond negatively to outgroup members' offers of help because they do not trust them (Halabi et al., 2021).

Overall, prior research thus suggests that, in postconflict contexts, even less prejudiced people might react negatively to outgroup help. However, to our knowledge, no research to date has investigated whether outgroup prejudice impacts reactions to outgroup help in postconflict societies, especially not during the COVID-19 pandemic. To fill that gap, we investigated whether receiving help with combating COVID-19 (vs. the control condition) would trigger more negative emotions, more negative perceptions, and less trust among individuals with low levels of prejudice. In particular, we hypothesized that receiving outgroup help (vs. not receiving outgroup help or the control condition; both studies) with COVID-19 would trigger negative emotions (i.e., more anger and less sympathy) and perceptions (i.e., outgroup dominance) and lower trust among individuals with less outgroup prejudice. We also hypothesized that individuals with high levels of prejudice would show negative emotions toward and anticipate negative perceptions and low levels of trust from the outgroup regardless of outgroup help (i.e., experimental manipulation). By extension, we expected that people with low (vs. high) levels of prejudice would react negatively to outgroup help (i.e., show more negative emotions) due to anticipating more negative intentions from the outgroup (i.e., perceived dominance), even when other intergroup variables (i.e., outgroup trust) were controlled for.

The Postconflict Context of Kosovo

In 1998–1999, Kosovan Albanians were the victims of ethnic cleansing by Serbian forces that led to the deaths of 10,000 Kosovan Albanians and the displacement of 800,000 others (Judah, 2008; Visoka, 2017). Later, in 2008, when Kosovo declared independence and more than 100 countries recognized its sovereignty, Serbia refused to recognize Kosovo as an independent state and has consistently lobbied against its sovereign status (Surk, 2019). Today, the relations between Kosovan Albanians and Serbs

following those conflicts continue to be tense (Telaku et al., 2021). Between then and now, when the COVID-19 pandemic reached Kosovo in March 2020, the country initially struggled to manage the crisis, and the number of individuals infected with COVID-19 spiked. Under those circumstances, Serbia offered 1,000 COVID-19 test kits to Kosovo as a show of support, and the aid topped the headlines in prominent international news media (Reuters, 2020). As such, the current relations between Kosovan Albanians and Serbians provide a highly relevant intergroup context in which to test our hypotheses.

Overview of Hypotheses

In two studies, we examined whether outgroup prejudice moderates the effect of intergroup help on outgroup emotions and perceptions (Study 1) and on trust (Study 2). To do so, we either presented participants with news that Serbia, their former opponent, had provided them with aid in fighting COVID-19 or else placed them in a control condition (i.e., reading about how their former opponent has supported another country or reading about aid exchanged between other countries). For these studies, we put forward three moderation hypotheses and one mediation hypothesis (see Figure 1). The first moderation hypothesis was as follows:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): Outgroup prejudice moderates the effect of intergroup help on outgroup emotions.

Specifically, we predicted that the outgroup help condition (vs. the control condition) regarding COVID-19 would trigger negative outgroup emotions among individuals with less prejudice. We also expected that highly prejudiced individuals would show negative emotions toward the outgroup regardless of outgroup help (i.e., experimental manipulation). Second, we also hypothesized that

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): Receiving outgroup help with fighting COVID-19 (vs. the control condition) increases perceived outgroup dominance among individuals with low prejudice.

On that count, we expected the perception to be pronounced among individuals with high prejudice regardless of the

experimental manipulation (i.e., outgroup help vs. the control condition). Third, we also hypothesized that

Hypothesis 1c (H1c): Receiving outgroup help with fighting COVID-19 (vs. the control condition) reduces outgroup trust among individuals with less prejudice.

Again, regardless of outgroup help, we expected the effect to be pronounced among individuals with high prejudice. Last, our mediation hypothesis was as follows:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Outgroup dominance mediates the effect of receiving help with fighting COVID-19 (vs. the control condition) on outgroup emotions among individuals with low (vs. high) prejudice (Study 1), even when other variables (i.e., outgroup trust; Study 2) are controlled for.

Study 1

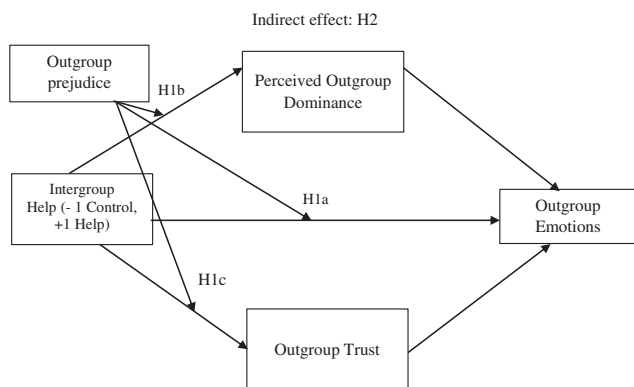
Examining intergroup relations between Kosovan Albanians and Serbs, Study 1 was designed to test H1a, which expected that outgroup prejudice would moderate the effect of intergroup help on outgroup emotions and perceived outgroup dominance. Thus, we measured outgroup prejudice as an individual difference and experimentally manipulated intergroup help with combating COVID-19 (i.e., outgroup help condition vs. the control condition). Meanwhile, the dependent variables were outgroup emotions and perceived outgroup dominance.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Study 1 was preregistered,¹ after which Albanian citizens in Kosovo were recruited via social media (i.e., established Facebook groups) to complete an online questionnaire. A priori analysis conducted with G*Power (e.g., Faul et al., 2009) for multiple regression with three predictors (i.e., two main effects and a two-way interaction) based on a small effect size (f^2) of .02, an α of .05, and a power estimate of .80 indicated that the study would require 550 participants. Although 596 individuals took the online questionnaire, we had to exclude data from 243 participants who failed the attention check, 29 who did not fully complete the questionnaire, and 63 did not consent to the use of their data. Thus, the final sample consisted of 261 participants (186 women; $M_{age} = 27.16$, $SD_{age} = 7.31$), all of whom were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: the outgroup COVID-19 help condition ($n = 128$) or the control condition ($n = 133$). A sensitivity analysis conducted with G*Power for a multiple regression revealed that, assuming an α of .05 and a power estimate of .80, our final sample was sufficiently powered to detect an effect size (f^2) of .04, which conventionally indicates a small effect size (Faul et al., 2009).²

Figure 1
Moderated Mediation Model Being Tested



Note. H = hypothesis.

¹ https://osf.io/t892d/?view_only=fa997d0e8adc4530868acc1679eebb4f
² All studies were conducted in accordance with ethical principles governing research involving human participants. All measures, manipulations, and exclusions in the studies have been disclosed and are reported either in the article or in the Supplemental Material. The method of determining the final sample size has been described, and data collection did not continue after data analysis.

Procedure

We presented the survey as a study on how people perceive different social groups, and as mentioned, participants completed an online questionnaire with two parts. The first part asked them to provide their demographic information (i.e., age and gender) and rate a series of statements concerning outgroup members (i.e., outgroup prejudice). The second part involved the experimental manipulation and the outcome measures (i.e., outgroup emotions and perceived outgroup dominance). Last, participants were fully debriefed on the study's purpose and asked to consent to the use of their data.

Measures and Experimental Manipulation

Outgroup Prejudice. Outgroup prejudice was measured using a six-item scale adapted from Wagner et al. (2006) including items such as “Serbs take Albanians jobs” and “Serbs living in Kosovo should choose to marry people of their own nationality.” Responses were given on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We calculated the mean of those scores to obtain a global prejudice score for each participant (2020; $\alpha = .84$; $M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.69$).

Experimental Manipulation. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (i.e., outgroup help vs. control condition). Participants in the COVID-19 help condition read a published news article reporting how their nation, Kosovo, had received COVID-19 test kits from Serbia, their former opponent. The article in the COVID-19 help condition, titled “Kosovo has received 1,000 coronavirus test kits from Serbia,” read as follows:

Kosovo is facing a limited number of COVID-19 tests. In the framework of cooperation between Balkan countries, Kosovo has received 1,000 COVID-19 tests from Serbia as support with the COVID-19 situation. The news was announced by the spokesperson of Kosovo's Ministry of Health, Mr. Faik Hoti, through a post on Facebook.

In the control condition, however, participants read a fictitious but ostensibly real news article reporting that Spain had helped Italy with the COVID-19 pandemic by supplying COVID-19 test kits. Titled “Italy has received 1,000 coronavirus test kits from Spain,” it read as follows:

Italy is facing a limited number of COVID-19 tests. In the framework of cooperation between members of the European Union, Italy has received 1,000 COVID-19 tests from Spain as support with the COVID-19 situation. The news was announced by the spokesperson for Italy's Ministry of Health, Mr. Roberto Speranza, through a post on Facebook.

Dependent Variables³

Outgroup Emotions. We assessed negative emotions toward Serbs with a scale containing seven items—for example, “anger” and “sympathy (reverse-coded)” —adapted from Kteily et al. (2016; see also Borinca, Çelik, & Storme, 2022). Responses were given on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; $\alpha = .80$; $M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.02$).

Perceived Outgroup Dominance

We assessed perceived outgroup dominance with a three-item scale adapted from Halabi et al. (2016) including the items “Serbs

would help Albanians only to satisfy their own needs,” “Serbs would help Albanians only to appear more dominant,” and “Serbs would help Albanians only to look good or strong in front of international community.”⁴ The responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). From the responses, we computed the mean of perceived social dominance ($\alpha = .91$; $M = 4.97$, $SD = 2.12$). Last, we included an attention check in the study to verify whether participants remembered the news accurately.

Results

We tested our hypotheses using a series of linear regression analyses that included the outgroup help and control conditions as predictors (effect coded as +1, -1; see Halabi et al., 2021) and continuous prejudice scores that were centered for each of the two outcomes (Aiken & West, 1991). After assessing the main effects of the outgroup help or control condition and prejudice, the two-way Outgroup help or Control \times Outgroup prejudice interaction was entered in a second step.⁵ Moreover, we examined the interaction for low and high levels of prejudice in each condition by performing analyses plotted ± 1 *SD* above and below the mean. Table 1 provides the estimated means and standard errors for negative emotions and outgroup dominance.

Negative Emotions

The main effect of intergroup help was significant, $t(257) = 2.00$, $p = .046$, $d = 0.20$. Participants experienced more negative emotions toward the former opponent when the former opponent helped their ingroup ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.48$) than when it had not (i.e., control condition = 4.55, $SD = 1.56$). The main effect of prejudice was also significant, $t(257) = 11.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.43$, such that negative emotions increased as prejudice increased ($\beta = .86$). Last, as predicted by H1a, the interaction of outgroup help and prejudice was significant as well, $t(257) = -4.77$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.58$.

As per H1a, we examined the interaction for low and high prejudice in each outgroup help condition (see Figure 2). Participants with low prejudice (-1 *SD*) reported more negative outgroup emotions in the COVID-19 help condition than in the control condition, $t(257) = 4.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.59$. However, the simple effect was not significant for individuals with high prejudice ($+1$ *SD*), $t(257) = -1.96$, $p = .051$.⁶

³ In both studies, we assessed outgroup liking (e.g., “How do you feel about the Serbs?”) on a scale from 1 (*negative*) to 7 (*positive*). Due to the possible overlap between that item and the measure for emotion, as well as that the results from those two measures appeared in the same direction, we have reported outgroup liking in the Supplemental Material for the sake of concision. Nevertheless, it worth noting that the results were virtually the same when we included emotion or outgroup liking.

⁴ The final item was somewhat modified to accommodate the context of Kosovo.

⁵ The same procedure applied in both studies unless noted otherwise.

⁶ A similar effect was found in an additional study ($N_{\text{total}} = 140$) that included the same outgroup help condition but compared it with a control condition with no help-related information provided. Results showed that less prejudiced participants displayed more outgroup negative emotions in the outgroup help condition than in the control condition. In addition, participants with high prejudice showed more negative emotions regardless of the experimental manipulation. We choose not to report that study in the present article due to space constraints, but more detailed information about it is available in the Supplemental Material.

Table 1

Outgroup Emotions, Perceived Outgroup Dominance (Studies 1 and 2) and Outgroup Trust (Study 2) as a Function of Intergroup Help and Prejudice

Study 1 (N = 261)	Outgroup prejudice			
	Low (-1 SD) intergroup help		High (+1 SD) intergroup help	
	COVID-19 help	Control	COVID-19 help	Control
Negative emotions	4.22 (0.15)	3.21 (0.14)	5.25 (0.15)	5.66 (0.14)
Perceived outgroup dominance	4.68 (0.22)	3.31 (0.22)	5.99 (0.23)	5.91 (0.23)

Study 2 (N = 550)	Outgroup prejudice			
	Low (-1 SD) intergroup help		High (+1 SD) intergroup help	
	COVID-19 help	Control	COVID-19 help	Control
Negative emotions	4.45 (0.84)	4.11 (0.93)	4.34 (0.88)	4.58 (0.88)
Perceived outgroup dominance	3.93 (0.16)	3.32 (0.18)	5.06 (0.17)	5.41 (0.17)
Outgroup trust	2.34 (0.13)	2.88 (0.14)	2.25 (0.13)	1.96 (0.14)

Note. Means and standard errors (in parentheses) for intergroup help manipulation at conditional levels of prejudice. SD = standard deviation.

Perceived Outgroup Dominance

The main effect of intergroup help was significant, $t(257) = 3.23$, $p = .001$, $d = 1.59$. That is, participants perceived that the former enemy was trying to assert dominance by helping their ingroup ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.94$) compared with when they had not helped them ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 2.23$). Prejudice’s main effect was also significant, $t(257) = 8.62$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.40$, meaning that perceived outgroup dominance increased as prejudice increased ($\beta = .97$). Last, as predicted by H1b, the interaction between outgroup help and prejudice was significant as well, $t(257) = -2.84$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.35$.

As per H1b, we examined the interaction for low and high prejudice in each outgroup help condition. Participants with low prejudice (-1 SD) perceived the outgroup as trying to assert dominance in the COVID-19 help condition more than in the control condition, $t(257) = 4.29$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.50$. Again, however, the simple effect was not significant for individuals with high prejudice (+1 SD), $t(257) = 0.27$, $p = .785$.

Mediation Analysis

We tested H2a using Model 8 in PROCESS for SPSS (Hayes, 2018; 5,000 bootstrapped samples) in a moderated mediation analysis for the outcome measure (i.e., outgroup emotions). We entered intergroup help (-1 = control condition, +1 = outgroup help condition) as the independent variable and outgroup prejudice as the moderator. Last, we entered perceived outgroup dominance as the mediator (see Figure 3).

The analysis showed that the moderated mediation index (-.07) was significant, with an interval value that did not include zero in its 95% CI [-0.14, -0.01]. The indirect effect of intergroup help was significant when prejudice was low (-1 SD), $\beta = .17$ ($SE = 0.06$), 95% CI [0.30, 0.06], but not when it was high (+1 SD), $\beta = .004$ ($SE = 0.03$), 95% CI [-0.06, 0.06].

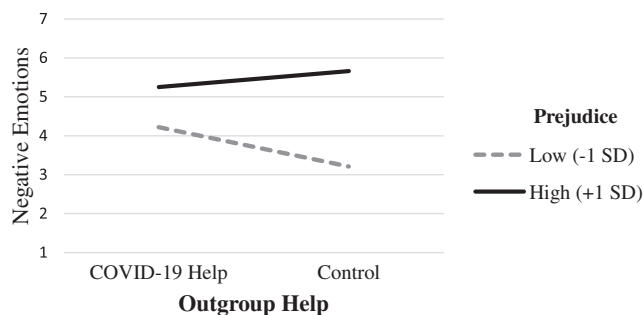
Study 2

Study 2 was designed to replicate and extend the findings from Study 1. In Study 2, we introduced five important changes. First, in Study 1, we compared the COVID-19 help condition (i.e., outgroup helping ingroup) with information about COVID-19 but without reference to the outgroup. The results suggest that the psychological effects of mentioning issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., inciting a feeling of threat) did not confound the results. However, it is possible that not outgroup help but simply mentioning any of Serbia’s activity had triggered the reaction experienced by participants with low levels of prejudice. Therefore, in Study 2, we compared a similar COVID-19 help condition with another condition in which the outgroup helped a different country.

Second, we added two items as a manipulation check to assess whether participants perceived the outgroup help as being sincere and well-intended. Third, the measure of blatant prejudice used in Study 1 focused on Serbs in Kosovo because the Serbian government was providing assistance with combating COVID-19. Although Kosovan Serbs live close to the Serbian border and operate primarily under Serbian instead of Kosovan jurisdictions and though Kosovan Albanians regard them as a part of the Serbian population who happen to reside in Kosovan territory

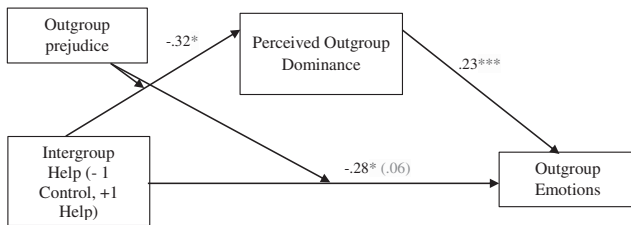
Figure 2

The Interactive Effect of Outgroup Help and Outgroup Prejudice on Negative Outgroup Emotions (Study 1)



Note. SD = standard deviation.

Figure 3
The Mediation Model Tested in Study 1



Note. Standardized regression weights and indirect effects for the moderated mediation model in which the effect of outgroup help (control condition where help is exchanged between different countries vs. outgroup help condition in which the outgroup helped the ingroup) on negative emotions is moderated by outgroup prejudice, which is then mediated by perceived outgroup dominance, Study 1. The direct effect of outgroup help on negative emotions is in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

(e.g., Brunwasser, 2011), we chose to include a distinct prejudice measure that focused on Serbs in general. Fourth, whereas the measure of emotions used in Study 1 was unbalanced in terms of positive and negative items, Study 2 introduced a more balanced measure to capture intergroup emotions.

Fifth and last, to extend our findings from Study 1, we introduced a measure of outgroup trust for two reasons. One, we sought to examine whether the effect of the interaction between outgroup help and prejudice on outgroup trust was significant, such that individuals with low levels of prejudice would have less trust when the outgroup (i.e., the former enemy) had helped them than when it had helped another nation (i.e., H1c). Two, we also wanted to examine whether perceived outgroup dominance in parallel with outgroup trust mediated the predicted interaction on the key outcome (i.e., outgroup emotions). These additional considerations allowed us to examine whether outgroup dominance independently relates to the key outcome.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Study 2 was also preregistered.⁷ A priori analysis conducted with G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) for multiple regression with three predictors (i.e., two main effects and a two-way interaction) based on a small effect size (f^2) of .02, an α of .05, and a power estimate of .80 indicated that the study would require 550 participants. We recruited 550 Kosovan Albanian participants (343 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 23.13$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 6.38$) from a large university campus in the city of Prizren, Kosovo, and data collection was stopped when the required number of participants was reached. We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions: the COVID-19 help condition ($n = 275$) or the control condition ($n = 275$). A sensitivity analysis conducted with G*Power for a multiple regression revealed that, assuming an α of .05 and a power estimate of .80, our final sample was sufficiently powered to detect an effect size (f^2) of .01, which conventionally indicates a small effect size (Faul et al., 2009).

Measures and Experimental Manipulation

Outgroup Prejudice. Outgroup prejudice was measured using the Blatant Prejudice subscale with five items adapted from Pettigrew and Meertens (1995), including “Serbs differ from Albanians in their beliefs and rituals” and “Serbs are very different from Albanian people in their hygiene habits.” Responses were given on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We calculated the mean of those scores to obtain a global prejudice score for each participant ($\alpha = .84$; $M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.67$).

As in Study 1, participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. The news article used in the COVID-19 help condition was identical to the one used in Study 1. However, in the new control condition, participants read a fictitious but ostensibly real news article reporting that Serbia had helped North Macedonia with the COVID-19 pandemic by supplying COVID-19 test kits. Titled “North Macedonia has received 1,000 coronavirus test kits from Serbia,” it read as follows:

North Macedonia is facing a limited number of COVID-19 tests. In the framework of cooperation between Balkan countries, North Macedonia has received 1,000 COVID-19 tests from Serbia as support with the COVID-19 situation. The news was announced by the spokesperson of Kosovo’s Ministry of Health, Mr. Muhamet Hoxha, through a post on Facebook.

Dependent Variables

Manipulation and Attention Checks. We introduced two items to assess participants’ perception of the outgroup help—“Do you think that Serbia’s offer of assistance was sincere?” ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.75$) and “Do you think that Serbia’s offer of assistance was well-intentioned?” ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.77$)—to be answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*absolutely*). At the end of the questionnaire, participants also had to indicate the type of content in the press release, which all participants did correctly.

Outgroup Emotions. We used a balanced 12-item scale to assess positive emotions toward Serbs—for example, “disgust” and “admiration (reverse-coded)” —adapted from Miller et al. (2004). Responses were given on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*absolutely*; $\alpha = .66$; $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.04$).

Perceived Outgroup Dominance. We measured perceived outgroup dominance as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .92$; $M = 4.44$, $SD = 2.16$).

Outgroup Trust. Outgroup trust was measured with three items adapted from Brown et al. (2008) and Tam et al. (2009): “Most Serbs can be trusted,” “Despite everything, I trust Serbian people,” and “Albanian people can trust Serbs.” Responses were given on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*absolutely*; $\alpha = .89$; $M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.64$). The measure was included to verify that any effects on outgroup emotions or perceived outgroup dominance could be attributed to the experimental manipulations of outgroup help and were independent of any effects of outgroup trust.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Concerning participants’ perceptions of the sincerity of outgroup help, the results included that the main effect of intergroup help was

⁷ https://osf.io/jtgrn?view_only=fa997d0e8adc4530868acc1679eebb4f

significant, $t(546) = 5.12, p < .001, d = 0.43$. The outgroup help was perceived as being sincere when given to another country ($M = 3.32, SD = 1.84$) but not when given to the ingroup ($M = 2.57, SD = 1.57$). No other effects were significant.

Concerning the second item for the manipulation check, the results revealed that the main effect of intergroup help was significant, $t(546) = 4.99, p < .001, d = 0.42$. Participants perceived the outgroup help as being well-intended when given to another country ($M = 3.48, SD = 1.74$) but not when given to the ingroup ($M = 2.76, SD = 1.73$). Prejudice's main effect was also significant, $t(546) = -2.37, p = .018, d = 0.20$, such that perceptions of good intentions decreased as prejudice increased ($\beta = -.17$). No other effects were significant.

Negative Emotions

The main effect of intergroup help was not significant, $t(546) = 1.05, p = .290$, whereas the main effect of prejudice was, $t(546) = -2.64, p = .008, d = 0.22$, such that negative emotions increased as prejudice increased ($\beta = .115$). Moreover, as predicted by H1a, the interaction of outgroup help and prejudice was significant, $t(546) = 2.76, p = .006, d = 0.23$.

As per H1a, we examined the interaction for low and high prejudice in each outgroup help condition. Participants with low prejudice reported more negative emotions in the COVID-19 help condition than in the control condition, $t(546) = -2.73, p = .007, d = 0.22$. However, the simple effect was not significant for individuals with high prejudice, $t(546) = 1.24, p = .213$.

Perceived Outgroup Dominance

The main effect of intergroup help was not significant, $t(546) = -0.74, p = .456$, whereas prejudice's main effect was, $t(546) = 9.27, p < .001, d = 0.79$, meaning that perceived outgroup dominance increased as prejudice increased ($\beta = .80$). As predicted by H1b, the interaction between outgroup help and prejudice was significant as well, $t(546) = 2.76, p = .006, 95\% CI [0.07, 0.41], d = 0.23$.

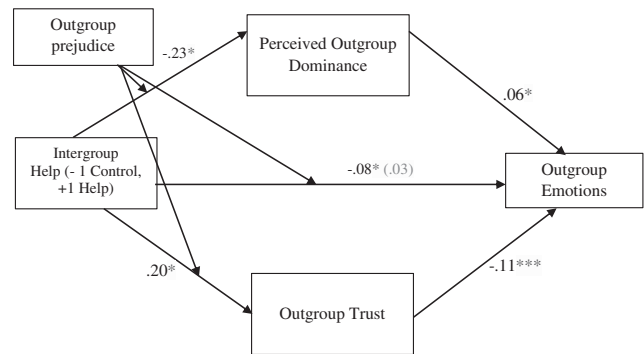
As per H1b, we examined the interaction for low and high prejudice in each outgroup help condition. Participants with low prejudice perceived the outgroup as trying to assert dominance in the COVID-19 help condition more than in the control condition, $t(546) = -2.48, p = .013, d = 0.21$. Again, however, the simple effect was not significant for individuals with high prejudice, $t(546) = 1.44, p = .150$.

Outgroup Trust

The main effect of intergroup help was not significant, $t(546) = 0.88, p = .377$, whereas prejudice's main effect was, $t(546) = -3.58, p < .001, d = 0.30$, meaning that outgroup trust decreased as prejudice increased ($\beta = -.25$). Furthermore, as predicted by H1c, the interaction between outgroup help and prejudice was significant, $t(546) = -2.95, p = .003, d = 0.25$.

As per H1c, we examined the interaction for low and high prejudice in each outgroup help condition. Participants with low prejudice trusted the outgroup less in the COVID-19 help condition than in the control condition, $t(546) = 2.71, p = .007, d = 0.22$. However, the simple effect was not significant for individuals with high prejudice, $t(546) = -1.47, p = .141$.

Figure 4
The Mediation Model Tested in Study 2



Note. Standardized regression weights and indirect effects for the moderated mediation model in which the effect of outgroup help (control condition where help is exchanged between different countries vs. outgroup help condition in which the outgroup helped the ingroup) on negative emotions is moderated by outgroup prejudice, which is then parallelly mediated by perceived outgroup dominance and outgroup trust, Study 2. The direct effect of outgroup help on negative emotions is in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Mediation Analysis

To test H2, we ran a moderated mediation analysis with parallel mediators to check whether the effect of the predicted interaction (i.e., COVID-19 help \times Outgroup prejudice) on outgroup emotions was mediated by the mechanisms of perceived outgroup dominance and outgroup trust. The parallel moderated mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS for SPSS (Model 8; Hayes, 2018; 5,000 bootstrapped samples), which allowed us to test whether perceived outgroup dominance could account for the effect of the predicted interaction on outgroup emotions even when controlling for outgroup trust. We entered intergroup help ($-1 = control condition, +1 = outgroup help condition$) as the independent variable and outgroup prejudice as the moderator. Last, we entered perceived outgroup dominance and outgroup trust as mediators (see Figure 4).

Regarding the mediating role of perceived outgroup dominance, the analysis showed that the moderated mediation index ($-.01$) was significant, with an interval value that did not include zero in its 95% CI [$-0.03, -0.003$]. The indirect effect of intergroup help was significant when prejudice was low, $\beta = .02 (SE = 0.01), 95\% CI [0.01, 0.04]$, but not when it was high, $\beta = -.01 (SE = 0.01), 95\% CI [-0.03, 0.002]$.

Regarding the mediating role of outgroup trust, the analysis also showed that the moderated mediation index ($-.02$) was significant, with an interval value that did not include zero in its 95% CI [$-0.05, -0.005$]. The indirect effect of intergroup help was significant when prejudice was low, $\beta = .03 (SE = 0.01), 95\% CI [0.01, 0.07]$, but not when it was high, $\beta = -.01 (SE = 0.01), 95\% CI [-0.05, 0.003]$.

General Discussion

Our results provide empirical support that outgroup prejudice moderates the effect of outgroup help with COVID-19 on outgroup emotions and perceived outgroup dominance. In particular, individuals with low prejudice showed more negative outgroup emotions

after reading that the outgroup had helped their nation with COVID-19 (i.e., in both studies) than after reading that such help had been exchanged between two other nations (i.e., Study 1) or that the outgroup had helped another country (i.e., Study 2). In addition, individuals with high prejudice showed more negative emotions regardless of the experimental manipulation, which indicates that their views on the outgroup are fixed.

Similar results were obtained regarding perceived outgroup dominance (i.e., both studies) and trust (i.e., Study 2). To be specific, individuals with low prejudice perceived a greater intention of outgroup dominance and trusted the outgroup less after reading that the outgroup had helped their nation with COVID-19 than after reading that such help had been exchanged between other nations or that the outgroup had helped a different nation. Again, the effect of perceived intended domination and outgroup trust was more pronounced for individuals with high prejudice, who sensed a high intention of outgroup dominance and showed less outgroup trust regardless of the experimental manipulation. Furthermore, perceived outgroup dominance mediated the effect of outgroup help on outgroup emotions among individuals with low prejudice (i.e., Study 1) even when outgroup trust was controlled for (i.e., Study 2). As expected, however, such was not the case for individuals with high prejudice, for whom perceived high intentions of outgroup dominance and lower trust remained unchanged regardless of whether the outgroup had offered assistance.

From a theoretical perspective, our findings may be relevant to several areas of research. Past studies have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a motivation to exclude and discriminate against members of the outgroup (Mandalaywala et al., 2020; Sorokowski et al., 2020). Our findings extend that research by revealing that individuals with low or high prejudice react negatively to outgroup help with fighting COVID-19 by misperceiving outgroup members' support and, in turn, display more negative emotions toward them. That result suggests that outgroup help might harm intergroup relationships in postconflict societies such as Kosovo during times of crisis.

Our research is also relevant to the literature on intergroup help and prosocial behaviors (Borinca, 2021; Borinca, Andrighetto, et al., 2022). Such literature shows that individuals with both low and high prejudice attributed more empathy and prosocial intentions to an offer of help from an ingroup member than one from an outgroup member (Borinca, Falomir-Pichastor, Andrighetto, & Durante, 2021). Our research, by extension, revealed that outgroup help increased negative outgroup perceptions, which consequently intensified negative outgroup emotions.

Our work also contributes to the literature addressing perceived outgroup dominance. Past research has shown that individuals react more negatively to outgroup aid because they perceive the help as a manipulative means used by the outgroup to assert its superiority and increase the dependency and subordination of ingroup members (Nadler & Halabi, 2006). Our findings add to the literature by demonstrating that such is also the case for individuals with low prejudice. In our research, such individuals perceived the offer of outgroup help as signifying outgroup dominance over ingroup members and, in turn, displayed more negative emotions toward them in the COVID-19 help condition than in the control condition. That pathway remained significant even when outgroup trust was positioned as a parallel mediator. Thus, in line with past research

(i.e., outgroup dominance) and trust are both relevant factors for determining the nature of intergroup relations. In fact, it appears that though a group of people, especially less-biased ones, may not necessarily loathe a former opponent, during crises they may easily misunderstand and distrust their actions, even if such efforts are humanitarian in nature.

Fourth and finally, our work contributes to the literature on intergroup conflict (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006; Shnabel et al., 2015). Conducted in the postconflict context of Kosovo, our studies proposed that Kosovan Albanians had received help from their former opponent, Serbia. Given the extremely sensitive nature of the relations between Kosovo and Serbia, due to the latter's failure to apologize for past misconduct (i.e., war and genocide in 1998–1999), it may be difficult for Kosovan Albanians to forget the past, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is the sort of crisis that can provoke memories and group-based emotions (Bar-Tal, 2007). That possibility is consistent with recent findings indicating that outgroup assistance followed by an institutional apology from the former opponent fostered suspicion and negative affect among members of the victimized group (Borinca, Falomir-Pichastor, Andrighetto, & Halabi, 2021).

On a practical level, our findings emphasize the critical need for conflict resolution and peace between Kosovo and Serbia in order to foster peace throughout Europe. Indeed, the current Russia–Ukraine crisis illustrates the need for European nations to work together to counter threats to global peace and humanity (Gardner, 2022).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the novelty and importance of our findings, we should acknowledge our research's limitations and propose directions for future studies. First, to avoid any overlap with the measure of outgroup emotions, we used a measure of blatant prejudice that does not include items addressing feelings or emotions, as is the case with subtle prejudice. However, future research should investigate the moderating role of subtle prejudice on outgroup dominance and trust.

Second, in the vignette methodology used to investigate intergroup help, we experimentally manipulated such help by exposing participants to a condition of real-world outgroup help and compared it with a control condition. Because we did not examine any other types of outgroup help, additional research is needed to replicate our findings by, for instance, using a different type of outgroup help, including support with COVID-19 provided by a single outgroup member or by the majority of outgroup members—that is, from the outgroup population. Alternatively, it would be interesting to test these findings while using help from a more peaceful outgroup in times of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last, our findings represent a context marked by prejudice (i.e., Kosovan Albanians in relation to Serbs) with a history of prolonged conflict. Although samples from Kosovo are not common in research on social psychology (Henrich et al., 2010), which is a strong point of our studies, future research should replicate those findings in a different intergroup context (e.g., between different native groups and immigrants and/or ethnic minorities; Adam-Troian & Bagci, 2021) to extend the generalization of our results.

Conclusion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, balcony singing, solidarity flash mobs, and other unifying activities have taken place in a variety of contexts (Libal & Kashwan, 2020). However, such social solidarity has been less likely to occur in intergroup contexts marked by conflict (Mandalaywala et al., 2020). Our findings show that such solidarity is even less likely to emerge in postconflict societies, wherein intergroup expectations are driven by societal beliefs, group-based emotions, and intergroup violence (Bar-Tal, 2007; Schmid & Muldoon, 2015). Our research revealed that, owing to a tragic past, people could not come together even during crises and feared being dominated by the outgroup. In response, interventions aimed at encouraging interethnic support should find ways to bring people together, particularly in times of crisis such as COVID-19.

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