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Bosnia and Herzegovina and EU: European Path and Obstacles on the Way to Membership

NEDŽMA DŽANANOVIĆ



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ABSTRACT

This analysis critically examines Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) troubled and prolonged journey toward European Union (EU) membership, arguing that while unprecedented geopolitical shifts have created a new window of opportunity for enlargement, the outcome for BiH remains elusive. Despite achieving candidate status and opening accession negotiations in 2024, BiH grapples with entrenched ethnic divisions, political instability, and institutional dysfunction. Although geopolitical developments, particularly following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, have intensified EU engagement with the region, they have simultaneously exposed persistent inconsistencies in the Union's enlargement policies and conditionality frameworks. The study scrutinizes the EU's dual role as both a normative and security actor, highlighting contradictions within its approach, and evaluates the extensive yet politically conditioned economic and financial cooperation between BiH and the EU. Furthermore, it analyzes evolving public attitudes toward the EU, noting a steady decline in support—especially within Republika Srpska Entity—driven by rising Euroskepticism and growing security concerns. By mapping these dynamics, the analysis concludes that without a coherent, values-driven EU strategy and credible, proactive reforms by BiH's leadership, the country's European aspirations risk remaining perpetually out of reach.

Keywords

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), European Union (EU), Geopolitical shifts

Introduction

***“The Western Balkans has long served as Europe’s testing ground. Today, it could become the region where Europe redefines itself”
(Helić, 2025).***

More than two decades after the Western Balkans were promised a European future, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) finds itself caught in a paradox—formally a candidate country, yet structurally and politically distant from true accession. The European Union’s commitment to the region has evolved in the wake of global geopolitical shifts, especially following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Yet, for BiH, these changes have produced a mix of symbolic victories and practical stagnation.

This report, “Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU: European Path and Obstacles on the Way to Membership”, explores the complexity of BiH’s EU integration process, marked by inconsistent reform progress, institutional paralysis, geopolitical maneuvering, and growing public disillusionment. It critically assesses the evolving role of the EU, both as a normative actor in the accession process and as a security provider in a politically fragile environment. At the same time, the analysis delves into the internal dynamics within BiH—focusing on political elites’ manipulation of EU conditionality, the stagnation of democratic reforms, and the weaponization of secessionist rhetoric.

By examining economic cooperation, political conditionality, public attitudes, and security concerns, the report aims to map out both the impediments and opportunities on BiH’s path toward EU membership. Special attention is given to the behavior of EU member states—most notably Hungary—and their impact on EUFOR credibility and broader regional dynamics.

The ultimate objective is to outline the key areas where action is needed—by both the EU and BiH’s political leadership—to ensure that the European future of Bosnia and Herzegovina becomes a matter of strategy and substance, rather than rhetoric and delay.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU Accession: Progress and Challenges

More than six years after formally applying for EU membership, and after more than 25 years of the integration process,¹ Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was granted candidate status by the European Council on December 15, 2022. This decision was widely interpreted as part of the EU's geopolitical awakening following Russia's aggression against Ukraine and an effort to revitalize the enlargement process (Džananović et al., 2023: 11). The rapid granting of candidacy status to Ukraine and Moldova shortly after their applications intensified pressure on the EU to positively respond to BiH's 2016 membership request—despite the fact that the 14 priorities outlined in the European Commission's 2019 Opinion (European Commission, 2019), originally set as prerequisites for candidacy, remain unfulfilled.

EU officials were then clear in their messaging: the decision to grant BiH candidate status was meant to support the country's citizens while simultaneously pressuring political leaders to advance reforms (EEAS Press Team, 2022). While Bosnian politicians celebrated the achievement with optimism and promises, many stakeholders remained skeptical, arguing that an unearned reward might not necessarily drive the reform process forward. A particular reason for skepticism was the fact that Dodik's SNSD and Čović's HDZ remained in the ruling coalition after the general elections in 2022. In previous years, both individually and in agreement, they had been a significant factor in blocking these processes.

The 2023 European Commission Progress Report on BiH (European Commission Staff, 2023) reinforced these concerns, indicating little progress—and even regression in four areas, including rule of law, the fight against corruption, and the adoption of the EU acquis. No progress was reported in 94 areas. However, in March 2024, the European Commission recommended opening accession negotiations with BiH—a decision that came only after a similar recommendation was made for Georgia in December 2023.

A key advocate for BiH's accession has been European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who strongly supported the decision while simultaneously launching her re-election campaign as the Spitzenkandidatin of the European People's Party. While the Progress Report painted a rather bleak picture of BiH's reform efforts, von der Leyen commended Bosnian authorities, stating: "More progress has been achieved in just over a year than in over a decade." (Sito-Sucic, 2024).

1 The European Commission introduced the first Regional Approach for the former Yugoslav states in 1997, and by 2000, all of them were recognized as potential candidates for EU membership.

In reality, Bosnia has achieved full alignment with the EU's foreign and security policy, passed long-delayed laws to combat money laundering, terrorism financing, and conflicts of interest, and taken steps to improve migration management by approving negotiations on a Frontex agreement. However, critical reforms, including those concerning judicial independence and election processes—remain stalled.

Despite von der Leyen's praise, BiH's progress she had lauded did not necessarily surpass the reforms of the previous decade. Between 2015 and 2018, BiH implemented key milestones, including:

- Signing and implementing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (2015).
- Submitting its EU membership application (2016).
- Adopting a “coordination mechanism” to manage EU-related reforms (2016).
- Answering the European Commission's Questionnaire (3,242 questions + 655 follow-ups).

Nevertheless, as in 2024, BiH's interests aligned with those of von der Leyen and the European Commission, that lead to a politically driven decision to move ahead with the accession process. Following the Commission's recommendation of March 12, 2024 on progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina (European Commission, 2024), the European Council decided on 21 March 2024 to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and invited the Commission to prepare the negotiating framework with a view to its adoption by the Council the moment all relevant steps set out in the Commission's recommendation of October 2022 have been taken (European Council, 2024, paragraph 30).

Unfortunately, from March 2024 until the publication of the new 2024 Progress Report, Bosnia and Herzegovina has not achieved any of the required steps nor has it made progress in any of the monitored areas (European Commission Staff, 2024: 3). The fragile reform dynamic stalled as the internal political controversies continued and the political campaign for the October 2024 local elections heated.

The chronic absence of significant progress is reflected in the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina remains in the early stage of preparation in most of the monitored chapters, while in the slightly better ones, it has been assessed as having a “some level of preparation level of preparedness.” No area has been recorded as having a good level of preparation.²

2 EC's reports use the following assessment: early stage, some level of preparation, moderately prepared, good level of preparation and well advanced. To describe progress made during the reporting period, the following terminology is used: backsliding, no progress, limited progress, some progress, good progress and very good progress.

One key lesson learned during this period is that progress, much like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder—that is, the EU must also have a genuine interest in recognizing and acknowledging progress.

A growing segment of both the public and political class seems to believe that BiH's EU accession depends solely on the EU's willingness to push it forward, regardless of domestic political realities. After more than a decade of the EU insisting on a rigid, complex set of accession conditions, its political decision to accelerate Bosnia's candidacy despite unmet benchmarks has fueled the perception that membership could now be driven more by geopolitical considerations than by the country's actual reform progress.

Conclusion: The integration process has lasted for over two decades, as it has for other countries in the region, and it is evident that the desired outcomes—such as meaningful progress toward EU membership, stabilization, and democratization—remain elusive. Even the so-called geopolitical shift in EU enlargement policy following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, aside from more favorable rhetoric on enlargement, has not resulted in significant breakthroughs.

One key lesson learned during this period is that progress, much like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder—that is, the EU must also have a genuine interest in recognizing and acknowledging progress. This underscores the need for Bosnia and Herzegovina to engage more intensively with EU institutions and member states in identifying shared interests within the EU integration process.

However, if the EU remains indecisive or unwilling to pursue enlargement, it is unlikely that even meaningful progress will be acknowledged or that there will be consistent pressure to address the more serious challenges and obstacles in the integration process.

Bosnia and Herzegovina must actively advocate for a meaningful and results-oriented reform of the EU enlargement policy—one that prioritizes the resolution of the most pressing obstacles. Achieving this requires strategic preparation, a well-defined set of priority issues, and coordinated efforts with other countries in the region, for whom the reform of enlargement policy is also a matter of shared interest.

The EU's Dual Role in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Post-Conflict Stabilization and EU as a Security Actor

The EU's presence in BiH extends far beyond the accession process. Since its establishment, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been at the center of EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Džananović, 2020: 6). This is evident in the dual mandate of the EU Special Representative (EUSR), who also serves as Head of the EU Delegation in BiH since 2011.³

While the scope and nature of the EU's involvement in BiH have evolved over time, the EU still maintains a military presence through Operation ALTHEA, mandated by the UN Security Council since 2004. EUFOR ALTHEA assists in:

- Training and capacity building for BiH's armed forces.
- Removing war remnants and providing disaster relief support.
- Maintaining a deterrence force to ensure a safe and secure environment.

Following Milorad Dodik's separatist campaign in late 2021 and early 2022, combined with broader international security concerns, the EU increased its peacekeeping troops from 600 to 1,100—a move made just before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. EU officials stated that, if necessary, EUFOR could deploy an additional 2,000 troops or more (Latal, 2022). The number of troops has fluctuated since, but most recent escalations in Republika Srpska have led to renewed strengthening of the EUFOR mission. EU temporarily added 400 troops from Czech Republic, Italy and Romania in what is considered to be “a proactive measure aimed at assisting Bosnia and Herzegovina in the interest of all citizens” (Rigney, 2025).

Many in BiH have also called for NATO to re-establish its presence, particularly in the Brčko District.

Despite a significant increase in troops, trust in EUFOR and the EU's determination to maintain the stability in the country has been seriously undermined over the past year due to the appointment of EUFOR's commander, Hungarian General László Sticz. After 15 years, Austria—a non-NATO nation—handed over command of EUFOR to Hungary on January 31, 2024. This shift had sparked

³ Following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, changes were introduced in the way the EU is represented globally – European Commission Delegations became EU Delegations. This shift was also reflected in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where, in the post-war years, the High Representative of the International Community for BiH (as defined by the Dayton Peace Agreement) also served as the EU Special Representative (EUSR), while the European Commission maintained a separate Head of Delegation. As a result of the aforementioned changes, the roles of Head of the EU Delegation and the EU Special Representative were merged.

controversy, particularly given Hungary's political alignment with Russia and its support for Dodik's secessionist rhetoric. Austrian newspaper *Der Standard* had voiced concerns that Hungarian leadership in EUFOR could lead to a downplaying of security risks in BiH, mirroring international failures in the 1990s (Spaić, 2023). According to the newspaper, U.S. diplomats had unsuccessfully tried to persuade Italy to take command instead of Hungary.

The EUFOR commander has the authority to assess the security situation and request additional troops, so it understandably raised fears that Hungary's influence could compromise EUFOR's credibility. These concerns had been initially sparked by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's past Islamophobic statements about Bosnia's Muslim population ("Shameful and Rude: Orbán Slammed over Remark on Bosnia's Muslims," 2021), Hungary's refusal to support a UN General Assembly resolution on Srebrenica (Lederer, 2024) and controversial statement by Hungarian then Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi in Belgrade, contradicting the EU's long-standing position on Srebrenica and regional reconciliation (Koseva, 2024).

On 21 January 2025, EUFOR Command changed, and the leadership was transferred from Major General László Sticz to Major General Florin Barbu of the Romanian Armed Forces. This important transition took place not a moment too soon, as barely a month later it was reported that members of Hungary's Special Counter-Terrorism Unit (TEK) had entered Bosnia and Herzegovina for a supposed joint exercise with members of the Republika Srpska Ministry of Interior. The Hungarian special forces entered the country through various border crossings, dressed in civilian clothing and using civilian vehicles. However, during the exercise, they appeared in uniform and were accompanied by a specialized vehicle. Unlike similar events in the past, this 'joint exercise' was not announced in advance, and their arrival in BiH coincided with the public announcement of the verdict against Milorad Dodik. Hungarian media outlet *VSquare* reported that Hungary's special forces were covertly deployed to Bosnia and Herzegovina with an alleged hidden mission: to extract Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik to Hungary if the State Court of BiH ordered his arrest over separatist actions⁴ ("Mađarski specijalci planirali izvući Dodika iz BiH u slučaju hapšenja preko RH," March 6).

4 The operation was leaked a day earlier, as Croatian authorities and journalists reportedly became aware of the plan, alerting ministries and likely helping to halt it. According to sources, the original escape route for Dodik would have been across the Croatian-Hungarian border near the city of Mohács, without informing Croatian authorities. An alternative route through Serbia to the Hungarian border near Szeged was also considered. Legally, TEK would have needed Dodik to hold Hungarian citizenship to justify intervention—though it is unclear if he has such status. BiH's Defense Minister Zukan Helez claimed he had been informed of Dodik's escape plan, while U.S. officials reportedly issued a warning to Hungarian special forces. Notably, Dodik visited Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Budapest on February 17, 2025, accompanied by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. Shortly afterward, TEK—led by Orbán's former bodyguard—was reportedly tasked with preparing and executing the extraction mission if needed.

The current uncertainty surrounding a possible (supportive) role of EUFOR in the arrest of Milorad Dodik further calls into question the EU's resolve and capacity to uphold peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In a broader international context, this raises even more far-reaching concerns—namely, whether and to what extent the EU can provide credible security guarantees to Ukraine if it is unable to do so in BiH.

Conclusion: Although the EU holds a dual role in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the importance of its security role has been largely overlooked in favor of a slow and ineffective accession process.

The recent developments surrounding EUFOR's leadership and the involvement of Hungarian special forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina highlight a critical vulnerability in the EU's approach to security engagement in the region. Entrusting command to individuals nominated by governments that oppose core EU foreign and security policy principles—and that espouse pro-Russian, Islamophobic, and discriminatory positions—undermines the EU's credibility and coherence as a security actor.

The incident involving Hungarian operatives demonstrates that some EU member states are willing to move beyond rhetorical support for destabilizing actors like Milorad Dodik, to active involvement in efforts that threaten the fragile stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This represents a dangerous precedent that must not be ignored.

The EU should adopt a more strategic and unified approach to EUFOR staffing and command appointments, ensuring/vetting that all personnel and contributing nations are fully aligned with the Union's fundamental values and foreign policy objectives, especially in the current geopolitical climate.

Moreover, the EU should recognize Bosnia and Herzegovina as a critical testing ground for its credibility as a security provider. It must fully utilize its broad array of instruments—political, security, and institutional—to reaffirm its role as a consistent and principled actor capable of maintaining peace and stability in the Western Balkans. That may have wider international implications for the EU itself.

A security vacuum in BiH is unacceptable. Strengthening EUFOR's integrity, determination and operational capacity must become a top priority if the EU is to uphold its commitments and reinforce its role as a reliable guarantor of security in its immediate neighborhood.

Economic and Financial Relations Between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina

The EU is Bosnia and Herzegovina's most important trading partner, accounting for 64% of its trade in goods (73% of exports and 59% of imports). In 2023, trade volume between the EU and BiH reached EUR 14.6 billion (European Commission Staff, 2024: 93).

The European Union remains the largest donor of financial assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina, having allocated €539.6 million under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II) for the period 2014–2020, and an additional €309.8 million under IPA III for 2021–2024. Under IPA III, 43.97% of the funding is dedicated to the core principles of EU accession—namely, good governance, the rule of law, and human rights—while the remaining 56.03% supports sustainable and inclusive economic growth. EU assistance also extends to civil society development and the co-financing of Bosnia and Herzegovina's participation in various Union programmes.

Since 2009, the country has also benefited from €1.104 billion in EU support through the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), catalyzing total investments worth approximately €6.7 billion. In the context of the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP), Bosnia and Herzegovina is set to receive €1 billion in IPA funding, which is expected to mobilize an additional €2.9 billion for strategically important, high-impact infrastructure and development projects.

Under the new Reform and Growth Facility, Bosnia and Herzegovina may access up to €1.085 billion in loans and grants, with disbursement contingent upon concrete progress in implementing reforms outlined in the forthcoming Reform Agenda to be agreed upon with the European Commission.

Additionally, the EU is actively supporting efforts to bolster Bosnia and Herzegovina's resilience to hybrid threats, including cybersecurity risks and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).

Security and defense cooperation between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina have also intensified in recent years. The Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AFBiH) receive assistance under the European Peace Facility (EPF), with a focus on enhancing their capacity to participate in EU-led Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions. The EU has provided EUR 20 million in

The growing institutional and programmatic integration with the EU, as well as developments in some new areas of cooperation, such as defense, only reaffirm the strategic alignment of BiH with the EU.

military assistance, supporting key areas such as demining operations, the purchase of specialized vehicles and metal detectors, and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) protection. The Bosnian demining battalion, which plays an essential role in achieving a mine-free Bosnia and Herzegovina, continues to benefit from EPF support. Additionally, the Armed Forces of BiH participate in the Balkan Medical Task Force, a regional initiative backed by EUR 6 million in EPF funding aimed at strengthening military medical cooperation among Western Balkan countries.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is also expanding its participation in various EU-led institutional and economic programs, which are crucial for the country's administrative alignment with EU standards. BiH is currently an observer in a pilot project under the Technical Support Instrument, which aims to improve public procurement practices. Additionally, the country is actively engaged in several EU Union Programs, including Horizon 2020, Creative Europe, Fiscalis 2020, Erasmus+, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, and the Single Market Programme. These programs provide BiH with opportunities to enhance innovation, cultural exchange, and market integration.

Recognizing the benefits of deeper institutional cooperation, BiH has also expressed interest in joining additional EU programs in the near future, such as Customs, Health, Justice, Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV), Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), and Digital Europe. These initiatives would allow Bosnia and Herzegovina to further align its legal, economic, and governance structures with those of the European Union, facilitating a smoother integration process.

Despite the significant financial and economic support from the EU, Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to struggle with structural economic weaknesses, political fragmentation, and delays in implementing crucial reforms. The EU remains deeply invested in the country's development, but long-term success depends on BiH's ability to accelerate institutional reforms, foster political stability, and improve economic governance. As accession negotiations advance, the continued commitment of both the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina will be critical in shaping the country's European future.

Conclusions: The European Union clearly represents the country's most vital trading partner and market access channel. Also, the financial support driving the country's development potential is unparalleled. The growing institutional and programmatic integration with the EU, as well as developments in some new areas of cooperation, such as defense, only reaffirm

the strategic alignment of BiH with the EU. That, however, places a greater burden of responsibility on BiH's political leadership.

BiH authorities must prioritize the urgent execution of the Reform Agenda in partnership with the European Commission to ensure access to reform-tied funding and maintain momentum in the accession process. Also, BiH should advocate for a step-by-step integration model, offering incremental access to EU funds and programs in exchange for real reforms.

It is of utmost importance for the EU to tie all future financial assistance to clear reform milestones, with disbursement contingent upon measurable progress. Also, to prioritize funding for anti-corruption bodies, judicial reform, public administration, and independent media.

Political actors in BiH should be pressured into building a functional governance model to reduce fragmentation, streamline decision-making, and further strengthen the country's administrative capacity to absorb and effectively utilize EU funding.

Both EU and local authorities should invest more efforts in increasing public awareness of EU's engagement and EU integration benefits.

Domestic politics: The Slow and Troubled EU Accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina's slow and inconsistent progress toward EU membership reflects both the country's internal political dynamics and the broader geopolitical complexities surrounding its accession process. Since the European Commission's 1997 Regional Approach, the 2000 Zagreb Summit, and the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit's promise of eventual membership for the Western Balkans, BiH has been part of the EU enlargement framework. However, more than twenty-five years later, it remains one of the most delayed and dysfunctional candidates.

This stagnation is not merely a result of bureaucratic inefficiencies or technical difficulties in meeting EU standards—it is primarily a consequence of political elites' unwillingness to prioritize EU integration. Many within the ruling structures fear that deeper engagement with the EU would ultimately erode their grip on power, as EU-driven reforms would necessitate greater transparency, institutional accountability, and the dismantling of entrenched patronage

networks. Instead of embracing the EU path as a national priority, political leaders have instrumentalized the accession process, using it to serve their short-term political interests while avoiding the fundamental changes it requires.

Nowhere is this manipulation of the EU accession process more evident than in the actions of Milorad Dodik, the pro-Russian leader of Republika Srpska and head of the Alliance of Independent Social-Democrats (SNSD). Dodik has long mastered the art of political doublespeak, presenting himself as a cooperative partner to EU officials when necessary while simultaneously undermining BiH's European path through separatist rhetoric and obstructionist tactics.

In December 2022, when a new state-level government was formed—including his SNSD as a key coalition member—Dodik publicly expressed willingness to cooperate with the EU on necessary reforms, though notably in exchange for increased financial support from Brussels. Yet, rather than capitalizing on the momentum created by the country's newly granted candidate status, Dodik quickly returned to his old playbook. He intensified his ultranationalist and offensive rhetoric, escalated tensions with the international community, and revived his campaign to separate Republika Srpska from the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As other members of the ruling coalition struggled to maintain their fragile commitment to an EU-oriented agenda, Dodik's actions effectively paralyzed the reform process. His blatant disregard for Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional framework and the Dayton Peace Accords has led to growing concern among both European policymakers and international actors. Until recently, the EU—specifically the part responsible for the accession process—had accepted as credible Dodik's insistence that his party appoint the chief negotiator with the EU on behalf of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

While there has always been a broad consensus within the EU that Dodik's behavior is deeply problematic, any attempt to impose punitive measures against him has been repeatedly blocked by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, one of his strongest backers. Orbán has consistently opposed EU sanctions against Dodik ("Hungary's FM: We Do Not Support EU Sanctions against Dodik," 2022; Radosavljević, 2023), shielding him from broader European pressure while actively maintaining strong political and economic ties with the Republika Srpska leadership.

This has left EU policymakers with limited options. One alternative currently being explored is the implementation of massive bilateral sanctions against Dodik and his inner circle, circumventing the need for a unanimous EU decision. However, to this point, only strong words were heard from the EU capitals.

The United States and the United Kingdom have introduced targeted sanctions earlier, but they have had little impact on his political standing. In defiance of Western isolation, Dodik has deepened his alignment with Russia, visiting Moscow five times since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and securing multiple high-profile meetings with Vladimir Putin. These visits served both symbolic and strategic purposes, reinforcing Dodik's pro-Russian stance while signaling his ability to resist Western diplomatic pressure.

Tensions in Bosnia escalated dramatically following last month's conviction of Dodik by the State Court, resulting in a one-year prison sentence and a six-year ban from public office.⁵ His defiance and consequent moves in the RS Assembly⁶ plunged the country into its most serious emergency since 1995.

Public pressure on Dodik's coalition partners⁷ grows into frustration over the deteriorating political and economic situation. As citizens fear violence, they are also increasingly disillusioned with empty promises of reform, as the government's inability to counter Dodik's destructive influence has led many to question the credibility of the EU accession process altogether.

In this climate of political stagnation and escalating tensions, substantive debate about EU integration is not even taking place. Instead, the EU is losing credibility due to its own indecisiveness, sending mixed signals about how serious it truly is about enforcing democratic principles and holding obstructionist leaders accountable.

What remains entirely absent from public discussion, however, is the future of the so-called "coordination mechanism"—an EU-imposed framework meant to streamline BiH's integration process. Initially designed to facilitate cooperation between different levels of government, the mechanism instead introduced a convoluted system of veto players that has only served to reinforce institutional paralysis. Rather than enabling progress, it has deepened existing gridlocks, effectively cementing the inability of already fragile institutions to function efficiently within the EU accession framework (Džananović et al., 2023).

At this pivotal moment, Bosnia and Herzegovina's path toward EU membership appears more uncertain than ever. Without a decisive strategy to address

5 Dodik was indicted in 2023 for signing laws that suspended rulings by the constitutional court and by the High Representative Christian Schmidt.

6 Dodik has rejected the indictment and retaliated by introducing measures to reduce the state's presence in the RS by banning the state prosecutor, the state court, and the intelligence agency. In addition he announced new measures such as retaking the border-control.

7 The coalition of parties known as the 'Trojka' announced its intention to dissolve the coalition with SNSD in late January this year and remove SNSD-appointed officials from state-level positions. However, it still remains uncertain whether this can be implemented—and whether their third coalition partner, HDZ, will support the move.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the path forward requires not only institutional reform, but also a recommitment to the core values of European integration—democracy, rule of law, and shared responsibility for peace and stability.

Dodik's obstructionism, restructure the coordination mechanism, and restore confidence in the accession process, the country risks remaining stuck in a cycle of political dysfunction and geopolitical limbo—perpetually considered for EU enlargement, yet never truly advancing toward membership.

Conclusion: The EU approach must recognize that its credibility and influence in the Western Balkans depend on resolute leadership, strategic clarity, and principled action.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the path forward requires not only institutional reform, but also a recommitment to the core values of European integration—democracy, rule of law, and shared responsibility for peace and stability.

The EU integration process of BiH has been exploited by domestic actors for political gain, with rhetorical commitments used to extract concessions from the EU while avoiding meaningful reform.

The EU's tolerance of obstructionist behavior—exemplified by its acceptance of Dodik's nominee as chief negotiator—has eroded its credibility and weakened the conditionality of the accession process. The lack of coordinated, decisive action sends mixed signals to the political actors and citizens about the EU's commitment to its core values.

Internal EU fragmentation—particularly Hungary's repeated opposition to sanctions—has shielded destabilizing actors, limiting the Union's capacity to respond effectively to threats to peace and democratic principles in BiH.

Under EU's watch, Dodik's alignment with Russia, has positioned RS entity as a destabilizing geopolitical outpost within Europe, further complicating the EU's strategic interests in the Western Balkans.

The EU-imposed coordination mechanism has not facilitated progress but has instead entrenched veto politics and reinforced institutional dysfunction, exacerbating the paralysis of BiH's EU integration structures. As a part of preparations for the future membership negotiations, the existing coordination framework, the coordination mechanism, should be critically reviewed and restructured to reduce institutional deadlock.

Citizens are increasingly disillusioned, perceiving both domestic leadership and the EU as ineffective. Economic decline, political deadlock, and the perceived inability to hold Dodik accountable have intensified frustration and apathy toward the EU path.

The EU should adopt a more assertive, value-driven strategy that prioritizes accountability, democratic conditionality, and rule of law over perceived political expediency.

Clear benchmarks and consequences for non-compliance must be communicated and enforced to restore credibility of the conditionality.

Given the frequent EU's internal deadlocks, like-minded member states should pursue coordinated bilateral sanctions against Dodik and his inner circle, mirroring the approach taken by the U.S. and U.K.

To reenergize the accession process, the EU should provide direct support to civil society organizations, academia, grassroots initiatives, reformist political actors and experts in particular areas who advocate EU values and institutional reform.

In order to rebuild public trust, the EU has to adapt its communication style through clear, consistent messaging on the EU's long-term commitment, conditions for progress, and benefits of membership.

The escalating crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina must not be downplayed or ignored. The country's 15-year stagnation should serve as a stark wake-up call for the EU and its member states to revitalize the enlargement process with a renewed and strategic geopolitical vision.

Public Opinion on EU Membership

Support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) EU accession remains consistently high among both the public and the political establishment, despite occasional fluctuations. Over the years, opinion polls have shown that a substantial majority of BiH citizens favor EU membership, seeing it as the best path toward economic prosperity, political stability, and integration into the broader European community. However, perceptions regarding the EU's commitment to enlargement, the geopolitical landscape, and the conditions imposed on BiH's accession process have evolved, reflecting both optimism and skepticism.

Compared to previous surveys, the 2024's results indicate a slight decline in public support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the European Union, which currently stands at 71.2%. This represents a decrease of 6.2% compared to the 2022 survey, and a decline of 2.1% compared to the 2023 results. At the same time, opposition to EU accession has increased by 4.5% compared to 2023 (Direkcija za evropska integracije BiH, 2024).

At the entity level, nearly 4 in 10 respondents (37.9%) in the RS entity would vote against EU membership in a potential referendum, in contrast to only 9.9% of respondents in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina who share this view.

Citizens primarily support Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU membership due to the expected benefits of free movement of people, goods, and capital. This is followed by the perceived guarantees of lasting peace, political stability, and adherence to laws and regulations.

The most common reason cited by those who would vote against EU accession is the anticipated increase in the cost of living and taxes.

Other significant concerns include excessive centralization and population emigration. Notably, this year for the first time, *emigration* has replaced *loss of cultural diversity*—particularly prominent in the RS—as one of the key reasons for opposing EU membership.

Although slightly lower than in previous surveys, just under half of Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens view the future of the EU as being rooted in strong internal cohesion and continued enlargement. This view is held by 54.4% of respondents in the Federation of BiH and 30.7% in RS. Meanwhile, one in three citizens in Republic Srpska believes that the EU will not survive as an integration project (30.8%) or that it will fragment into blocs (20.0%).

When asked who would benefit most from Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU membership, 42.2% of respondents identified youth as the primary beneficiaries. Politicians remain the second-most cited group, followed by entrepreneurs. Notably, citizens of RS Srpska are more likely than those in the Federation to believe that politicians would benefit most (29.2% vs. 18.1%). Across the country, farmers are seen as the group least likely to benefit, with only 4.9% of respondents holding this view.

Half of all citizens expect that joining the EU would lead to a significant improvement in living standards, with this expectation much stronger in the Federation of BiH (63.5%) than in Republic Srpska (39.1%).

Unlike in some other candidate countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have a single major political party that is openly Eurosceptic or anti-EU. The political elite across the spectrum nominally supports EU membership, though their actions often contradict their rhetoric. While Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, frequently engages in anti-EU and anti-Western rhetoric, ridiculing so-called "EU values"—particularly in contexts related to human rights, liberal democracy, and traditional family structures—he and his party have not officially abandoned the EU integration process. Instead, Dodik strategically uses the EU accession process as leverage, seeking financial and political concessions while simultaneously undermining the very reforms necessary for progress.

The 2024 Western Balkans Regional Poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI) provides further insight into the evolving public perception of the EU and other global actors. According to this survey, 76% of BiH respondents support EU membership, demonstrating a relatively stable commitment to the European path. However, only 44% believe that the EU has a genuine intention to offer membership to the region, indicating deep skepticism about Brussels' political will to follow through on its promises. This sense of disillusionment is further reinforced by the fact that only 39% of respondents favor a foreign policy course exclusively oriented toward the EU and the West (International Republican Institute, 2024).

When asked about their attitudes toward specific countries, BiH citizens favor Germany (74%) and Turkey (69%) the most, while the United States and China rank lower, sharing the sixth and seventh positions at 53% each. Russia, once viewed more favorably, has dropped to eleventh place with 40% approval.

The perception of external threats has also shifted. In the 2022 survey, Russia was seen as the primary threat to BiH, reflecting concerns about Moscow's role in the Balkans. However, in 2024, Serbia is now perceived as the top security threat (27%), followed by the United States (20%), with Russia dropping to third place (15%). This shift suggests that, while Russia's influence is still viewed with concern, regional instability and Serbia's political maneuvering are now seen as more immediate dangers.

Conclusions: The EU remains the most desired political and economic destination for the majority of Bosnia and Herzegovina's citizens. While support for EU membership remains strong recent data shows a gradual decline in enthusiasm, accompanied by a rise in opposition, particularly in the RS which signals growing skepticism among citizens about the credibility and deliverability of the EU integration process. The EU should reassess its political messaging, clearly reaffirming that BiH has a real and attainable path to membership, based on merit and reform—not indefinite waiting. Also, launch high-level strategic visits, public campaigns, and tangible initiatives that show visible EU engagement in citizens' daily lives.

The divergence in attitudes between the Federation of BiH and RS is stark. In the Federation, support for EU membership and belief in its benefits—especially improved living standards—remains high. In contrast, RS shows a sharp rise in Euroscepticism, distrust in EU sustainability, and increased belief in negative outcomes such as centralization and emigration. The growing euroscepticism in RS could be addressed through targeted outreach, particularly to youth, civil society, farmers and media. The EU needs to support information campaigns

that clarify EU policies, counter disinformation, and highlight concrete benefits of integration at the entity level.

Although 76% of respondents support EU membership, only 44% believe the EU truly intends to integrate the Western Balkans. This disconnect reflects growing disillusionment with the EU's perceived indecisiveness, lack of tangible progress, and unclear political commitment.

Citizens widely agree that young people would benefit most from EU membership, highlighting a generational aspiration toward mobility, opportunity, and reform. However, skepticism remains regarding who profits, as many in RS believe politicians stand to gain the most. Thus, EU should prioritize promotion of youth programs, scholarships (e.g., Erasmus+), employment opportunities, and entrepreneurship. Support for domestic policies that mitigate brain drain and create incentives for youth retention and return migration should be increased and made visible.

While Germany and Turkey are the most favored international partners, geopolitical trust is fragile. Serbia is now viewed as the top security threat, surpassing Russia which signals growing regional anxiety and a re-evaluation of external alliances.

Response to the changing perception of threats should include strengthening regional diplomatic presence, promoting confidence-building measures, and countering destabilizing narratives. EU and NATO specifically should forge a unified approach to regional security and democratic resilience.

Regular public opinion tracking through EU-funded surveys is very important as it may suggest adjustments in actions and strategies to reflect real-time shifts in public attitudes. It is important to involve local researchers and institutions in analyzing trends and shaping evidence-based policy engagement.

What to expect?

There is broad recognition that the EU's two key decisions in recent years—granting candidate status and recommending the opening of accession negotiations—were long overdue. While there is little criticism of the EU's geopolitical shift regarding Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, many believe that these developments highlight the inconsistent nature of the EU's conditionality toward Bosnia and Herzegovina.

One of the most controversial aspects of the EU's past conditionality in BiH has been its insistence on implementing the Sejdić-Finci group of rulings by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). These rulings demand the elimination of ethnic-based discrimination in the country's electoral system, which was effectively institutionalized by the Dayton Peace Accords. For nearly a decade, the EU presented this as a non-negotiable prerequisite for BiH's progress in the accession process. Yet, Brussels has since abandoned this requirement as a strict condition, leading many experts to argue that the EU's demands were both excessively rigid and ultimately futile.

Currently, two competing viewpoints dominate the narrative on the EU accession:

1. One is primarily concerned with BiH's geopolitical and regional positioning, arguing that the EU has lost its influence and credibility due to its indecisiveness and slow responses to crises.
2. Second is more pragmatic, focusing on what can realistically be achieved within the EU framework—such as the benefits of the Growth Plan—and how BiH can leverage this to accelerate its integration.

Those in the latter camp emphasize two critical variables that will shape BiH's accession trajectory:

- The role of individual EU member states in vetting accession, particularly the possibility of national vetoes.
- The overall pace of reforms and whether the EU will allow for faster accession processes in the future.

BiH's experience in the Western Balkans' "waiting room" for EU accession has made it painfully clear that the current shape of the enlargement process has a limited impact on resolving deep-seated structural challenges. The prospect of further delays and political blockages has also raised concerns about the role of neighboring countries in potentially obstructing BiH's path.

Although Croatia, an EU member since 2013, has never made serious moves to veto BiH's accession, several unresolved bilateral issues and ongoing tensions—particularly regarding Croatia's attempts to influence BiH's electoral law reforms—could eventually lead to such a scenario. Hungary, through its growing and increasingly contentious involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is positioning itself to play a more influential role in the country's political life. In this context, BiH would greatly benefit from a shift in the EU's decision-making process, particularly the application of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in enlargement matters. This would limit the ability of individual member states to unilaterally block BiH's accession, reducing the risk of politically motivated vetoes.

The shifting geopolitical landscape, unresolved internal reforms, and potential obstacles from neighboring states add further layers of uncertainty. Ultimately, the success of BiH's EU integration will depend not only on domestic reforms but also on how the EU itself navigates its internal enlargement dilemmas and geopolitical priorities.

Conclusion

Bosnia and Herzegovina's European future stands at a critical crossroads. Despite enduring public support for EU membership and a strong national aspiration for stability, prosperity, and international alignment, the country remains hindered by deeply fragmented governance, entrenched political elites, and an EU enlargement framework that is increasingly viewed as rigid and geopolitically inconsistent.

As this analysis demonstrates, symbolic gestures—such as the granting of candidate status and the recommendation to open accession negotiations—must now be backed by concrete, measurable progress. The credibility of both the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina is on the line. For the EU, this calls for a more strategic, coherent, and values-based enlargement approach. For BiH, it requires a shift from passive anticipation to active reform, institutional strengthening, and renewed democratic commitment.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession cannot be treated as a secondary issue. It is a defining test of the European Union's geopolitical credibility and its dedication to the principles of democracy, rule of law, and regional stability. At this decisive moment, the path forward is stark: strategic engagement or strategic failure. The latter would reverberate far beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina or the Western Balkans.

Only through shared determination, principled leadership, and consistent action can the long-promised goal of EU membership become a transformative and achievable reality for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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