



Envisioning a Better Bosnia and Herzegovina

On March 9, 2024, in Buna (near Mostar), the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) gathered a group of senior officials from major political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) to explore visions for a better future for Bosnia and Herzegovina and debate how to advance the country's EU path. The meeting produced several conclusions that are an integral part of this report. The report's elements and conclusions are not necessarily based on a consensus but reflect the most critical elements of the discussion. The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule, and none of the stated content and conclusions could be assigned directly to any of the participants. The meeting is part of a project jointly supported by the Robert Bosch Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Igor Novakovic, CIG's Senior Associate, prepared the report, and CIG takes sole responsibility for its content.

Visioning a Better Future for Bosnia and Herzegovina

Since the Dayton Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been peaceful, but political clashes and some level of instability are still present. Confronted with the EU and NATO perspectives, the local push for both has been uneven, while the interest of the EU in the region's integration has been moderate at best. However, with the Russian War in Ukraine, the EU has realized that it should also act as a geopolitical actor by granting candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, and it has also accelerated its engagement in the Western Balkans. BiH obtained its long-awaited candidate status in December 2022, which was not a result of the work of institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The process of adopting reform laws and decisions is taking place to open membership negotiations between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina, on which the European Commission gave recommendations and positive comments.

Internal debates and political differences make reforms difficult because political debates and conflicts spill over into reform processes. Thus, the general topic of the meeting was the debate on the desired future of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the ways forward, membership in the EU, internal differences, possible common elements, etc.

Others outlined that the principal and probably single common denominator for all in the country is the European integration process and that this goal can also push other processes related to unresolved political issues. "We should think about how to improve the lives of the citizens within the existing framework, and the best and only way is to work with each other." Others outlined NATO integration as another goal. However, some participants disagreed. Some stressed that NATO is embedded in Dayton and that through the UN SC Resolution 1573, they are the principal guarantors of peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Other than that, BiH remains a protectorate, and several participants insisted this has to change if the country wants to move forward.

A participant said that the past of the three constitutional peoples is too complex and that every European challenge and conflict is reflected in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For him, the critical goal should be peace, and all actors should have that in mind. “No one is happy with the current constitution, but we should not forget that it has brought and preserved peace.” Other participants said that the EU and NATO integration does not necessarily demand a change of the Dayton Agreement and, consequently, the country’s constitution. Maintaining the current structure is expensive, but it has passed the test of time and guarantees peace. Another participant stressed that the EU and NATO integration could help Bosnia’s external stability, but internal challenges will remain. He stressed that the necessary precondition for internal stabilization is confronting the past and accepting facts about it as the relevant institutions determined them.

Several participants said that for Bosnia and Herzegovina to become routine and stable, foreigners should leave its institutions. But, the general condition for that is that the three constitutive parts of the country should become closer while the economic, social, and infrastructural development should steadily improve. “A keyword for societies becoming closer is nurturing of “empathy.” Politicians and regular citizens should constantly try “to put themselves in the shoes of the others” and see what are the effects of some of their policies and statements on others. Empathy and cooperation could change everything. The internal narratives have to change.

Issues that are not necessarily related to the EU integration should not “mess up the process,” said a participant. This practice “poisons” a process that is already demanding. Another participant warned that even with the opening date for negotiations, it will take time to open the first clusters and start the process. The first step is the screening process, which will take some time. The EU path is “a tough nut to crack.”

Others outlined that one of the significant issues in progress towards the EU is the so-called “Sanader’s dilemma.” Some politicians might be concerned that the EU integration and pro-EU reforms could negatively affect them personally. “This has to be tackled systemically in the whole region, not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as now we expect politicians to act counter-intuitively.” One of the participants highlighted the issue of external influence, that is, countries that are not “part of the democratic order, but have a huge influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as Russia, Turkey and China.” “Through their investments, they finance destructive forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina, slowing down democratic processes.” The participant suggested that starting the process of “regional lustration” of the EU would be an essential driver of change.

The EU Growth Plan

The meeting then focused on discussing the EU Growth Plan. This is a new initiative of the EU, out of the current scope of the pre-accession instruments, which foresees an additional six billion euros for the region’s countries. However, this is not a multilateral initiative (although the plan entails all six Western Balkan states); each country will sign a separate agreement with the EU based on the reform agenda. The current European Parliament should adopt it, while the countries will receive the funding by the end of the year in their respective budgets.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, besides the reforms related to two EU freedoms (free movement of people and free movement of services), additional priorities are reforms related to digitalization, digitalization of the public sector, development of the private sector, reform of the energy sector, development of human capital. It is essential that the state creates a reform agenda and develops concrete steps to make it happen and absorb the funding. As one participant has outlined, the geopolitical moment has made the EU push for it, and although the funding is relatively small, it supports some of the crucial reforms for the societal and economic advancement of the countries.

The plan is also crucial for the EU integration process of the Western Balkans. It pushes the finalization of the Regional Market, which will be the actual test for participation in the EU Single Market. Participants stressed that all should take this initiative seriously and not treat it as guaranteed. “Funding is not reserved necessarily for us; if funds remain unutilized, the EU will transfer the money to the more successful candidates.”

The participants were informed that the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina should draft a reform plan, and all governance levels should support it. One of the opposition participants warned of the danger that a complex internal structure of the state could make the plan ineffective, as cantons and entities can block specific related reforms. To make the plan more effective, some coordination mechanisms should be established.

Conclusions and recommendations

The following conclusions stemmed from the meeting.

- Peace is indispensable, and all political actors should continue to strive to preserve it. The sides should work to help reduce the insecurities of others.
- The change of narratives and empathy about the “other” is the way forward. Not all perceptions will likely change, but there is ample space for improvements, especially if “empathy” for others is a guiding principle.
- There are considerable political differences regarding many issues in the country, especially its internal structure and the presence of foreigners in the state institutions, but there is also a space for debate. The progress should be based on an incremental approach, establishment of common grounds, and mutual concessions.
- The EU bid of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a common element for all sides. All support should be used to advance the country’s future. The pro-EU reforms should be well thought out ahead of time as the country should use the push of the EU in favor of enlargement (caused by geopolitical considerations) and position itself better in negotiations with the EU.
- The EU Growth Plan represents a chance that should not be missed because of internal political squabbles, as the funds are focused on supporting those reforms that could serve as a basis for new economic and technological upstart.

Participants agreed that this CIG-offered format is useful, that the rules and conditions set by the organizers should be observed, and that meetings should continue in the future, where the next should happen in July, after the EU elections.

Participants

English Alphabetical Order

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