

How to Improve Cooperation on the Path to the EU

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) reconvened a group of senior officials from major political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) on November 17, 2024, in Travnik to discuss the implementation of specific recommendations from previous meetings, as well as new initiatives.

This time, the focus of the meeting was again on the EU integration process and regional integration, as both processes are undeniably interlinked. The Travnik meeting took place shortly after Bosnia and Herzegovina failed to deliver on the Reform Agenda and the EU Growth Plan for the region, as the European Commission rejected the submitted document.

In this context, the discussions also explored how BiH could send stronger signals to the EU to demonstrate that all political actors take the processes of EU and regional integration seriously.

Current Challenges in EU and Regional Integration Processes

The meeting began with a debate on the current state of the EU integration process. One participant, familiar with BiH's obligations on the EU path, stressed that political actors in BiH must adopt a holistic approach, recognizing that European and regional integration, the Reform Agenda, and the Growth Plan are interconnected. In other words, the EU path cannot be viewed separately from the creation of a Regional Market, as everything is interwoven.

The participant noted that for the first time, the EU is seriously considering geopolitical challenges. The EU process, which was previously technical, now also has a foreign policy dimension. The Reform Agenda is a prerequisite for receiving funds—targeting vulnerabilities specific to each country.

Another participant highlighted that BiH lags behind all five EU candidate countries in the region in terms of preparedness. This reflects an internal misunderstanding of the EU integration process and its connection to regional processes. Although all actors in BiH publicly support EU membership, consensus at the working level is often absent, particularly on issues of competence distribution.

The coordination mechanism for EU integration was also discussed. One participant criticized its rigidity, noting that the mechanism essentially mirrors BiH's constitutional structure, which hinders its functionality. "Fifty people cannot accomplish anything. Perhaps we need to stress-test the system." The process often escalates issues from experts to ministers and, if unresolved, to political leaders. Creative solutions and flexibility are needed to avoid politicization and irrelevant disputes. He also emphasized the importance of political leaders meeting without external actors.

A participant from Banja Luka pointed out that political consensus in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) is crucial for resolving EU-related issues.

A participant from Sarajevo added that BiH must stop complaining to external actors about the lack of consensus and instead engage in direct dialogue without leaking discussions to the media.

Reviving the Parliamentary Forum for European Integration. Conclusions and Recommendations

After the introductory debate, participants were divided into three working groups to formulate actionable recommendations. The working groups reached similar conclusions, summarized as follows:

1. Reviving the Parliamentary Forum for European Integration

There was absolute consensus across all three working groups on the need to revive the Parliamentary Forum for European Integration. This body, comprising parliamentary committees on European integration from state, entity, cantonal, and Brčko District levels, should actively monitor the process of pro-European reforms. This forum could bridge political differences and build consensus on key issues, as it includes representatives from both ruling and opposition parties.

Participants proposed convening the Forum before the EU-Western Balkans Summit on December 5, 2024, in Neum. This would send a positive message to the EU about BiH's seriousness in EU and regional integration processes.

Participants proposed elements for the Agenda of the upcoming Parliamentary Forum meeting:

1. Information from the Directorate for European Integration (DEI) of BiH

A presentation on the key conclusions of the EU Progress Report on BiH's path to membership, along with the necessary steps for adopting the Integration Program and fulfilling the remaining conditions for convening the first intergovernmental conference. Special emphasis will be placed on the dynamics of preparations for starting membership negotiations with the EU.

2. Information from the Central Bank of BiH

A presentation on the obstacles and timeline for BiH's membership in the EU's Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA).

3. Presentation by the newly appointed Secretary-General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

A discussion on BiH's obligations and benefits under the Berlin Process and the creation of a Common Regional Market.

It was suggested to invite representatives from the following institutions to the session:

- Directorate for European Integration (DEI),
- Central Bank of BiH,

- Ministry for European Integration of the RS,
- Office for EU Integration of the FBiH Government,
- Equivalent office from Brčko District,
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of BiH,
- Regional Cooperation Council (RCC),
- EU Delegation to BiH.

It was also proposed that the session be closed to the media for the reasons mentioned during the previous discussions.

Commitment:

The participants pledged to initiate and support the organization of this meeting.

2. Adopting a Declaration on EU Accession Negotiations

It was suggested that all legislative bodies, including cantonal assemblies, the Brčko District Assembly, both houses of the FBiH Assembly, the RS Assembly, and both houses of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH, adopt a unified declaration on EU accession negotiations. This would confirm the political will of all actors in BiH and define a coordinated approach to addressing priorities. However, consensus on this proposal was not achieved.

3. Appointing a Chief Negotiator

Participants recommended that the chief negotiator for EU accession should have experience working with the Directorate for European Integration but noted that absolute political neutrality is not required.

4. Focusing on the Reform Agenda

The group agreed that BiH should prioritize implementing the Reform Agenda and closely monitor its progress, as the best way for pushing the pro-EU reforms.

Recommendations for Future Dialogue

The following conclusions and recommendations emerged from the meeting regarding the future work of informal dialogue in BiH. The recommendations are informal in nature, and no consensus among participants was sought:

1. The format of informal dialogue meetings has proven productive over the past three sessions. Participants praised the methodology and suggested continuing this approach in 2025, potentially expanding the format.
2. EU and regional integration processes should remain the central focus, as they enjoy broad consensus in BiH. Future meetings should align with ongoing developments and address current issues.
3. Topics for discussion should include the EU Progress Report and lessons from Croatia's EU accession process.

4. In the absence of evident pressing topics, CIG should consult participants to gather suggestions for future discussions.

Participants

in alphabetical order

Igor Crnadak, Party of Democratic Progress
Julia von Dobeneck, Robert Bosch Foundation
Maja Dragojević Stojić, Serbian Democratic Party
Damir Džeba, Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina
Petar Galić, Croatian National Movement
Shpetim Gashi, Council for Inclusive Governance
Amer Kapetanović, Regional Cooperation Council
Safet Kešo, Party of Democratic Action
Damir Mašić, Social Democratic Party
Srđan Mazalica, Alliance of Independent Social Democrats
Dragan Mioković, Our Party
Igor Novaković, Council for Inclusive Governance
Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, Council for Inclusive Governance
Haris Šabanović, Party of Democratic Action
Mia Vukojević, Rockefeller Brothers Fund
Ognjen Vukojević, Alliance of Independent Social Democrats