

Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU Path: Credibility and Political Will

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) failed to seize the opportunity to open accession negotiations with the EU in early December 2025. Two key laws, on the Courts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council, have still not been adopted, and the chief negotiator for EU accession negotiations has not yet been appointed.

At the same time, the internal political crisis, which began with the adoption of controversial laws on reclaiming competences previously transferred to the central level by the National Assembly of Republika Srpska (RS) in February 2025, is still ongoing. Two rounds of extraordinary elections for the President of RS in November 2025 and February 2026 (repeat of elections in some electoral posts due to irregularities) further increased tensions. It is therefore very likely that opportunities for reforms will remain limited, particularly in light of the upcoming general elections in BiH scheduled for October.

Meanwhile, persistent rumors about reforms in the European Union (EU) are circulating in the context of a potential end to the war in Ukraine and the prospect of EU membership for that country. A reform of the EU accession methodology is reportedly being considered which, in addition to Ukraine, could also be offered to other candidates, including those in the Western Balkans.

In this context, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized another session of dialogue among officials from the main political parties in BiH. Previous meetings organized by CIG, both within BiH and in regional formats, concluded that the existing negotiation process is already extremely challenging for a country with the internal complexity of BiH, and that it might be necessary to present representatives of the most important EU member states with a vision for a modified approach. In other words, the most influential EU states would like to see a coherent joint initiative and vision coming from political actors in BiH, rather than the blockages and misunderstandings that have characterized the process so far. The aim of the meeting was therefore to discuss the current situation regarding BiH's EU integration, internal challenges, and the country's potential response to a possible "geopolitical" offer that may materialize in the coming months.

Several conclusions were formulated during the meeting and are included in this report. The elements of the report and its conclusions do not necessarily reflect consensus but rather represent the most critical aspects of the discussion. The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule, and none of the content or conclusions presented can be directly attributed to any participant. The

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BiH's European Path in an Election Year

The European Union has remained consistent this time. After a series of earlier “concessions” regarding criteria, first related to granting candidate status and later to opening negotiations, there have been no new concessions since 2024. Every opportunity to open negotiations or move the process forward has been missed primarily due to political blockades and friction among the political elite. The gap between the actors has so far proven insurmountable, despite announcements of willingness to compromise and attempts by part of the “governing coalition” to somewhat alter the structure of the Council of Ministers of BiH in order to avoid potential vetoes.

The tense political situation in BiH, recent extraordinary elections for the President of RS, and the upcoming general elections further complicate matters. Several participants stated that, because of the elections, this year is likely lost for progress in BiH's EU integration, since a new parliamentary majority and Council of Ministers will probably only be formed at the end of the year. In an election year, compromises in public discourse are generally portrayed as unnecessary concessions and sometimes even as “betrayal of national interests.”

However, proposals were also made regarding what could still be done before the elections. Some participants insisted that the process of selecting a new Minister of Security should be completed by placing the initiative on the agenda of the Council of Ministers, which in their view could overcome the current veto regarding the laws and the appointment of the chief negotiator. Others emphasized that some issues must be resolved comprehensively. One proposal was that the Council of Ministers agree to send the laws to the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH for a vote to see what the outcome would be, arguing that this could create new momentum and send a clear signal to the EU. Some participants also believed that, alongside these steps, a reform of the election law before the elections was necessary, ensuring that the collective rights of the constituent peoples and their electoral will are respected. As one participant noted, the chief negotiator, for whom it had previously been agreed that the person should come from the Serbian people, is not a function primarily intended for negotiations with the EU but rather negotiations with domestic actors: entities, cantons, cities, and municipalities. In other words, it should be someone capable of efficiently negotiating compromises at all levels of government and aligning the pace of reforms with local conditions in agreement with the EU. His proposal was that appointing the chief negotiator would create the preconditions for further steps.

The debate then focused on who is responsible for appointing the chief negotiator, the Council of Ministers or the Parliamentary Assembly, noting that this issue is currently before the Constitutional Court. One participant expressed doubt that the Court could rule on the matter, since the position of chief negotiator is not a constitutional category, while others argued that referring the issue to the Court could accelerate the process. During the discussion, it was emphasized that a new narrative must be established and that declared political will must be aligned with practical actions. In other words, there needs to be consensus that compromises related to the EU are not “unnecessary concessions,” and that there should finally be a political cost for failing to advance on the European path. As one participant noted, it is necessary to define both the “price” of

integration and the price of non-integration, something that all actors, the EU, member states, political parties in BiH, and citizens themselves, must understand. However, some participants stressed that this would require a clear signal from the EU that a credible offer exists, where successful internal compromises would bring clear political benefits for those involved. A participant also pointed out that resistance to reforms in some circles is not about the reforms themselves but about the rule of law, and that judicial reforms in countries such as Albania have demonstrated how deeply such reforms can challenge individual and group interests.

The discussion also addressed the oversight of upcoming elections and the introduction of new voter identification scanners. Several participants considered this a key prerequisite for measuring the actual level of public support for the EU path, emphasizing that all political actors should support the implementation of these technical solutions.

EU Membership Criteria and the Specificities of BiH

A significant part of the meeting was devoted to announcements of a new EU approach to enlargement. Due to the possibility of ending or at least freezing the war in Ukraine, discussions are underway within the EU and its member states about a new enlargement methodology likely based on gradual or phased accession of new member states. In other words, what is being considered is a form of “geopolitical enlargement,” which, in addition to Ukraine, could also be offered to the countries of the Western Balkans.

One of the most discussed ideas is the temporary suspension of veto rights in the EU Council until the Union undergoes institutional reform. There are also reports of a more extensive transitional period that would allow stronger oversight by EU institutions over the governments of new member states and the reforms they implement. Particular attention would be paid to rule-of-law reforms and the fight against organized crime and corruption, which would be key conditions for progress. It was also noted that, within the geopolitical dimension of enlargement, alignment with the EU’s foreign and security policy remains a *conditio sine qua non*.

All participants supported the new approach to EU enlargement and the reform of the methodology, though many details remain unclear. In the case of Ukraine, the main challenge is not integration itself but the political consequences of integrating a country that has been at war for four years, as well as practical issues such as the Common Agricultural Policy. Others pointed to practical political challenges in EU member states, particularly France, where the issue of enlargement is a serious domestic political matter. For any major initiative, it may be necessary to wait until elections in these countries are completed (for example, in France in spring 2027).

A participant familiar with the EU integration process emphasized the need to define clear timelines, conditions, and benchmarks for transitions between stages. It was also suggested that the EU should act as a “galvanizer of the process” for the Western Balkans, as it has for Ukraine and Moldova. With clearer engagement from the EU, more could be achieved from local elites across the region. Some participants argued that continued monitoring of reforms even after accession could help shift power from „political parties to institutions in BiH and the wider region.“

Although the meeting was initially convened to potentially engage the group involved in these discussions before the start of the election campaign, in order to demonstrate political commitment and outline what type of EU approach would be desirable for a country as complex as BiH, most participants concluded that such an initiative should be postponed until after the elections.

For this reason, it was agreed to organize another meeting soon, where scenarios for BiH after the elections would be developed in the context of finally opening EU negotiations and preparing a framework reform program for the future governing majority. This would include defining desirable steps for opening negotiations and actions to follow afterward. It will also be necessary to consider how BiH should respond to possible changes in the enlargement methodology and how to demonstrate a new initiative and political will to the EU and key member states.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The current moment may prove crucial, as EU enlargement has regained momentum and a new enlargement methodology is being considered. Although this is primarily driven by the possibility of an end War in Ukraine, it will likely have significant implications for the Western Balkans as well. If BiH acts strategically and proactively, it could join the renewed enlargement dynamic already involving Montenegro and Albania. However, the main limiting factor remains the upcoming general elections in October 2026, which will likely slow down all processes and compromise opportunities related to opening EU negotiations. The meeting produced the following conclusions and recommendations, based on proposals from individual participants and not necessarily representing full consensus:

- A potential meeting with representatives of key EU member states before the elections should be postponed until after the general elections, when the composition of the new governing majority becomes clearer.
- Several proposals were made to unblock the opening of negotiations immediately: either by sending the two judiciary-related laws to a vote in the Parliamentary Assembly and appointing the chief negotiator in the Council of Ministers, or by partially changing the composition of the Council of Ministers to avoid potential vetoes. However, some participants insisted that this package should also include adoption of a new election law guaranteeing that the electoral will of the constituent peoples is respected.
- Political actors should reach consensus on a new narrative that aligns declared support for EU membership with concrete actions. Compromises related to EU integration should not be portrayed as unnecessary concessions, and a „political cost for stagnation on the EU path should be established.“
- Through dialogue with the EU, it is necessary to define both the „cost of integration“ and the „cost of non-integration,“ ensuring that all actors - EU institutions, member states, political parties, and citizens - understand the implications. It was stated that a clear signal from the EU is also needed for this, namely that “there should be a credible offer where more successful outcomes of internal compromises would have clear positive political momentum for the participants.”
- Reform of the enlargement methodology based on phased accession was welcomed, though many aspects remain unclear and clear timelines, conditions, and benchmarks must be defined, especially the ones for transition to the „higher level in the EU membership.“

- Some participants argued that phased accession would also allow continued monitoring of reforms related to rule of law even after accession, contributing to „a transfer of power from political parties to institutions.“
- The EU should act as a galvanizer of reform processes in the Western Balkans, similar to its role in Ukraine and Moldova. Such a proactive approach would surely increase the demands of citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and other Western Balkan countries for more efficient negotiations and reforms with the EU
- BiH and other Western Balkan countries should consider issuing a joint declaration expressing willingness for rapid integration into the Schengen Area, signaling strong commitment to reforms and phased EU accession.
- Dialogue in this format should continue in the coming months to develop scenarios for BiH after the elections and prepare a framework reform program for the next governing majority. Accordingly, a set of desirable steps for opening negotiations would be developed, as well as the activities following that CIG will take responsibility for organizing the next meeting before the start of the election campaign.

Participants

Abecednim redom

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