

Urging Unity for Bosnia and Herzegovina's European Future

After the European Council meeting in late June 2025, it became clear that a “miracle” would not occur—Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) would not open pre-accession negotiations with the EU. Anticipating that a follow-up meeting of senior representatives of major BiH political parties would be useful regardless of the Council’s outcome, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized a new meeting on July 1, 2025, in Buna, near Mostar.

The meeting addressed the next steps: what the EU should do to encourage political actors to move forward with reforms needed to open negotiations by the end of the year, and what domestic actors should do to reach at least a minimal consensus. Participants also considered what steps parties should take—internally and publicly—to gain broader support for required reforms. A special guest at the session was Pierre Mirel, Honorary Director General of the European Commission and a CIG board member.

Several conclusions were developed, forming the core of this report. These do not necessarily reflect consensus but highlight the most critical points of the discussion. Held under the Chatham House Rule, none of the content is attributable to individual participants. The meeting is part of a project supported by the Robert Bosch Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Igor Novaković, CIG’s senior associate, prepared the report, and CIG takes responsibility for its content.

Where is Bosnia and Herzegovina After the European Council's Decision?

Russia’s war on Ukraine has reshaped EU attitudes toward enlargement. Geopolitics and security have come to the forefront. The EU now aims to act as a true geopolitical actor in its neighborhood, with enlargement as one of its key tools. The strategy has two dimensions: speed up accession for countries making progress (Montenegro and Albania), and accelerate gradual accession for others until internal EU reforms are met.

BiH belongs to the second group. Still, this process remains crucial for its foreign policy positioning, deeper EU involvement, and internal cohesion.

Despite these broader dynamics, the European Council decided not to open negotiations with BiH. This sends a dual signal: first, that after lowering the bar to just two laws (on the Courts and the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council) and appointing a chief negotiator, the Commission is ready to move forward; and second, that no further concessions will be made—without fulfilling these conditions, negotiations will not be opened.

One participant noted that the EU's goodwill and the "window of opportunity" created by geopolitical shifts are real. Montenegro and Albania offer examples—they created internal consensus and took reform seriously, earning EU's recognition. "There is real belief in Brussels that Montenegro could join the EU by 2030." BiH could have the same chance, but it must act. Without reform by October 2025, the country risks losing 10% of the earmarked EU funds. "Everyone thinks that BiH agreed on the Reform Agenda, but in truth, there is no formal agreement because some political actors refuse to sign the same document alongside others."

The risk, the speaker added, is "missing the opportunity altogether." "Phased accession is a chance because it opens the path to the single market, which, for example, fueled Poland's development."

"The EU path is held hostage by internal dynamics," said a participant. Everyone knows what is needed. But once again, internal conflicts have become a fundamental obstacle. "The next train to the EU arrives in late 2025." With 2026 being an election year, "this may be the last chance for a longer period." Without action, it will pass. Political actors should act and adopt the two laws. The EU is clear: no more concessions.

The 2024 local elections fundamentally changed the relationships between political parties. Each party is now focused on how it will perform in the 2026 general elections. Compromise has become politically risky. Political parties fear they may be punished at the polls for compromises.

Opening Negotiations Before the Election Year: How to Avoid a Missed Opportunity?

The discussion then shifted to internal dynamics. Relations among the ruling parties had already deteriorated, but fully collapsed at the end of February after the National Assembly of Republika Srpska (RS) passed laws to reclaim certain competencies previously transferred to the state level. Combined with legal proceedings against RS President Milorad Dodik, this led to a complete breakdown in the relations within the ruling coalition at the state level. As a result, key laws were not passed, a chief negotiator was not appointed, and the Reform Agenda was not adopted.

Other government partners in the coalition considered the RS laws as an attack on the constitutional order and an attempt to dismantle the state. Public discourse shows that one segment of the ruling coalition—the Troika—seeks to reform the central government by replacing SNSD with opposition parties from RS, hoping this could unlock the process. Meanwhile, the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH) is not necessarily against government reconstruction, but insists on a clear plan to make progress on electoral law.

One participant noted that it is high time to accept the EU as a shared goal. Equally important, however, is that those who are "essentially not for the EU," as he put it, stop obstructing the process. "By bringing opposition parties from RS into power at the central level, the current blockade could be lifted."

Others were skeptical, pointing to unresolved issues rooted in BiH's complex institutional structure and decision-making process:

- Whether the proposed laws can pass in the House of Peoples of the BiH Parliamentary Assembly;
- Whether it will be possible to appoint a chief negotiator, who, by earlier agreement, should come from the Serb constituent people;
- What implications this has for the principle of subsidiarity, under which both entities and cantons should participate in implementing EU-related reforms.

According to this view, reconstructing the central government might move things forward in the short term, but would not resolve the underlying causes of political deadlock.

Some argued that regardless of any coalition reshuffle, coordination with the entities is necessary, as effective power rests with those currently in office at the central level. In other words, while procedural conditions for negotiations might be formally met, every subsequent step will likely be hindered by the subsidiarity principle. Others believed that the government should be reconstructed immediately, beginning by appointing a new Minister of Security, arguing that this would allow the Council of Ministers to function and enable a simple majority for decision-making.

On the House of Peoples, one participant noted that in practice laws will not pass without the support of the RS ruling majority—not due to procedural reasons, but because it would be impossible to reach a sufficient majority.

Regarding the chief negotiator, most participants agreed that there is no clear procedure for appointment, and that the selection could be made at the level of the Council of Ministers.

There was also disagreement over the role of the High Representative. While some insisted that he is a “security safeguard,” others argued that he will not interfere in reconstructing the ruling majority and that his potential involvement may become more part of the problem than part of the solution.

Additional proposals were also discussed. Some participants believed that, over time, dialogue with SNSD might be necessary to secure minimal consensus on certain issues, just to open the process before the 2026 elections.

One idea was to bypass a government reshuffle and instead introduce the two laws, have the Parliamentary Assembly appoint the chief negotiator rather than the Council of Ministers, and find a “Solomonic solution” for the Reform Agenda.

The narrative is simple: these laws and decisions are pro-European and in the interest of all BiH citizens. No political party wins or loses by voting for them. The winners are the citizens. “This would create an ad hoc coalition of the willing and clarify things.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following conclusions and recommendations emerged from the meeting, which are not necessarily based on consensus:

BiH currently has an open “window” to start negotiations only until the end of 2025. In June 2025, the European Council did not open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, but is still prepared to quickly resume the process if minimal conditions are met. The ball is now in the court of local politicians. BiH knows what the minimum requirements are, and further concessions from the EU will not be granted. BiH politicians are responsible for the success of the country's EU path. The end of 2025 could be BiH's last train to the EU until spring 2027.

- Discussions in this format should continue in the autumn, as many things will become clearer by then. The conclusions and discussion points from this session should be conveyed to party leaderships. This format has proven useful for prompting constructive dialogue.
- Participants agreed that obligations toward the European Commission should be fulfilled without delay or preconditions.
- EU-related reform laws should be submitted to an *ad hoc* majority in the BiH Parliamentary Assembly for urgent adoption. These should be presented as non-political, pro-European laws that benefit all citizens—not individual parties.
- The possibility of appointing the chief negotiator through the Parliamentary Assembly should be seriously considered.
- The Council of Ministers should be unblocked by appointing a new Minister of Security.
- As for the participation of ruling parties at the BiH level in meetings organized by CIG, efforts should continue to aim for inclusivity. The example from the 2024 Travnik meeting, which achieved practical results, demonstrates that such formats can yield pleasant and desirable surprises and potentially create new political quality.
- Upcoming sessions should address how to ensure elections are free and fair. The current situation and the issues being debated are precisely the result of shortcomings in the electoral process.

The meeting reaffirmed that the possibility for BiH to open accession negotiations is still alive, but fading fast. Without urgent reform, strategic coordination, or at least pragmatic interim solutions, the country risks missing a rare and potentially long-lost opportunity to move toward European integration. It is unlikely that another such opportunity will open again before spring 2027.