

# Bosnia and Herzegovina in the European Union: An Unfulfilled Dream or Reality?



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**O**n February 15, 2016, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) submitted their application for membership in the European Union (EU). It seemed at the time that this could result in candidate status, especially given that neighboring countries such as Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, or Northern Macedonia were granted candidate status within two years of applying. However, almost six years after applying for membership, Bosnia and Herzegovina has not received candidate status, setting a record in the length of waiting for it.

In May 2019, the European Commission (EC) adopted Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's application for Membership of the European Union and pointed out that the said state will need to fundamentally improve its legislative and institutional framework to ensure it meets the fourteen priorities (including Rule of Law, Public Administration Reform, Fundamental Rights, and Democracy).

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country with a very complex system of government – entities, districts, ten cantons, a certain number of cities, and municipalities. Therefore, decision-making procedures are very slow and complex and require compromises, which ultimately results in the fact that out of all priorities set by the EU for Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership after submitting the application, only one has been fully implemented, and a few have been partially met, and there are no indications of any activities to fulfill others.

At the same time, while the country's path to the European Union appears to be completely blocked, the country is in its greatest crisis since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995 which ended the bloody war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Decision-making by the state government is stopped,

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different types of blackmail are used by some of the politicians with separatist tendencies to achieve different political goals (especially when voting for certain laws such as The Election Law<sup>1</sup>), and it seems that membership in the EU has never been less likely, as well as all the benefits that it brings for a country like this.

The possibility of Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership in the European Union in the future will depend on how to resolve the current crisis now.

Meanwhile, the presence of the EU is paramount for peace and stability in the Western Balkans, as well as long-term prosperity. Brussels' bureaucratic institutions are,

<sup>1</sup> Find out more at: <https://faktor.ba/vijest/ucjene-cov-icevog-hns-a-ili-izborni-zakon-ili-herceg-bosna-ovo-su-zakljucci/154056> [in Bosnian]

paradoxically, welcome in an area without developed institutions and the rule of law.

### EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

One of the key reasons for the creation of the European Union in the 1950s was the promotion of peace, progress, and European values on the continent. Any country in Europe can apply for membership of the European Union, while meeting the accession criteria known as the Copenhagen Criteria<sup>2</sup>. These criteria were established by the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 and supplemented by the Madrid European Council in 1995<sup>3</sup>.

The strengthening of the cooperation between member states allows to intensify the enlargement process. There were seven phases of enlargement until now. The countries considered to be the founders of the EU (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) joined in 1973, in the first phase of enlargement, followed by Denmark, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. Then, in 1981, Greece joined; in 1986, Portugal and Spain; in 1995, Austria, Finland, and Sweden.

The largest enlargement of the European Union took place in 2004, when it was joined by the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania became member states, and the last enlargement took place in 2013, when Croatia joined the EU. Thus, the European Union has expanded from 6 to 28 member states and today stretches from the Atlantic to the Black Sea and covers a population of 500 million people. In a referendum held in 2016, the United Kingdom decided to leave

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.parlament.ba/Content/Read/125?title=Put-do-%C4%8Dlanstva-u-Evropskoj-uniji> [in Bosnian]

<sup>3</sup> Find out more about the Copenhagen criteria at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/glossary/accession-criteria\\_hr](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/glossary/accession-criteria_hr)



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the European Union (also known as 'Brexit'), so that today there are 27 member states (EU-27)<sup>4</sup>. This is the first and only case so far that a member state has left the Union.

However, the path to EU membership is very complex and implies that countries wishing to be members must show that they are capable of being part of the EU, i.e., that they have great support from citizens, and that they politically, legally, and technically meet EU standards and norms. The path to membership implies three phases, and the next phase can be passed only when all the conditions from the previous phase are met. Once reforms and negotiations are completed with the consent of both sides, a candidate country can join the EU only if all member states agree.

<sup>4</sup> Find out more about Brexit at: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/brexit.asp>



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The complexity of this process is the reason why the European Union has not been enlarged for nine years. Currently, five states are in the status of candidate countries – Albania, the Republic of Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidates.

Albania and Northern Macedonia are currently closest to membership, but Northern Macedonia's path has been blocked due to Bulgaria's veto, demanding that Northern Macedonia recognize the Bulgarian minority and resolve other contentious issues related

to history and language.<sup>5</sup> Bulgaria's veto also affects Albania, as its path to the European Union is linked to Northern Macedonia, prompting some countries (including Bulgaria) to demand that the two countries be viewed separately in terms of their membership in the European Union.

Serbia and Montenegro's path to the European Union have also slowed down. Montenegro has opened all chapters in accession negotiations but has managed to close only three. Serbia's path largely depends, above all, on resolving disputed issues with Kosovo<sup>6</sup>. For years, Turkey has been a candidate for membership in the European Union only on paper, without any action to resolve disputes that have blocked its path to the EU. However, full membership was never a reasonably realistic and pragmatic goal, as Turkey has always deviated in terms of liberal democracy and civil liberties from the average EU norms<sup>7</sup>.

The rest of the countries, except for Turkey, make up the Western Balkans region. The main feature of this region of countries is that it shares a land border with EU member states on all sides [See: Figure 1].

The war in Ukraine, and fears that it could spread to other countries, prompted some of them to seek urgent accession to the European Union. Thus, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky first submitted a request for urgent admission of Ukraine to the EU<sup>8</sup>,

<sup>5</sup> Find out more about this issue at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/interview/bulgarias-veto-hurts-future-of-north-macedonia-diaspora-leader/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2021/12/14/serbia-a-step-closer-to-eu-membership-but-kosovo-relations-remain-key>

<sup>7</sup> Kollias, C. (2021) "Turkey's Road to EU Accession: A Bridge Too Far?", [in]: *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, pp. 1-21.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/02/ukraine-bid-fast-track-membership-eu-likely-end-dis-appointment-zelenskiy>

Figure 1: Western Balkans and the European Union



Source: Eyes on Europe. Available [online]: <https://www.eyes-on-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/image1-1024x788.png>

Georgia<sup>9</sup>, and Moldova<sup>10</sup> also applied for the EU membership. However, although this is a good time to do so, the question arises as to what extent the EU is ready to accept these countries as members, given that they have not undergone the necessary reform process that is binding on any country aspiring to join the EU<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/georgia-formally-applies-for-eu-membership/a-61001839>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/3/moldova-officially-applies-for-eu-membership>

<sup>11</sup> According to Transparency International, in 2021, Ukraine ranked 121<sup>st</sup> out of 180 countries in terms of corruption in the public sector. See: <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/ukraine>

The possibility of fast-tracking EU membership for Ukraine was also discussed at the Summit held in Versailles on March 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. While Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland supported the option, France, Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands opposed it. French President Emanuel Macron cited as a reason for France's opposition that it is not possible to open an accession procedure with a country at war. The Latvian Prime Minister, Christianis Karins, said it was important to show a clear, open door for EU membership for Ukraine.

It remains to be seen whether the momentum in which the world finds itself after Russia's attack on Ukraine will lead to a faster

and more flexible enlargement of the EU, for the first time in almost ten years.

### **BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA AND THE EU**

One of the main strategic goals of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country is full membership in the European Union. The process of the state's accession to the EU implies the existence of political consensus, continuous cooperation, and undertaking numerous reforms in society with the aim of successful integration into the EU. The necessary steps make the process long and complex, especially for a country with a very specific political system – a state with three presidents, two entities<sup>12</sup>, one district, ten cantons, with over ten prime ministers and over a hundred ministers.<sup>13</sup>

After the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (known as the 'Dayton Agreement') was signed in December 1995, ending the war, the first activities in the process of the state's accession to the European Union began. In 1998, the EU/B&H Consultative Working Group (CTF) was established to provide technical assistance in the areas of administration, regulatory framework, and policy. In the same year, the *Declaration on Special Relations between the EU and B&H* was signed, and it can be said that these were the first steps in the process of B&H's accession to the Union.

In 1999, the Stabilization and Association Process was launched, which gave Bosnia and Herzegovina the opportunity to join the European Union. One year later, in March

<sup>12</sup> The State of Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska.

<sup>13</sup> Find out more about the complexity of Bosnia and Herzegovina's administrative system at: [http://4liberty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ADMIR-ČAVALIĆ-\\_-THE-CURIOUS-CASE-OF-DECENTRALIZATION-IN-BOSNIA-AND-HERZEGOVINA.pdf](http://4liberty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ADMIR-ČAVALIĆ-_-THE-CURIOUS-CASE-OF-DECENTRALIZATION-IN-BOSNIA-AND-HERZEGOVINA.pdf)



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2000, the EU Roadmap was published by EU Enlargement Commissioner Chris Patten, defining eighteen key conditions that the country must meet to start drafting a Feasibility Study to kick off negotiations on a Stabilization and Association Agreement<sup>14</sup>. The actual work on the said Feasibility Study began in March 2003.

At that time, the European Commission handed over to the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina a questionnaire of 346 questions on the economic and political organization of the state and other areas relevant to the Stabilization and Association Agreement. In November 2003, the European Commission adopted an evaluation of the Feasibility Study, which identified sixteen

<sup>14</sup> EU Enlargement Commissioner Chris Patten.

priority areas for reform for the European Commission to recommend to the Council of the European Union to open Stabilization and Association negotiations with B&H.

Negotiations on a Stabilization and Association Agreement were officially launched in November 2005, and, in June 2008, the agreement was signed between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU, which entered into force on June 1, 2015. In December 2010, following the fulfillment of 174 technical requirements by the authorities in country, the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council decided to abolish the visa regime for citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, allowing them to travel freely to signatory countries of the Schengen Area.

It is important to mention the so-called 'British-German Initiative for B&H' from November 2014. The Initiative addressed the domestic authorities to commit in writing to implement institutional reforms at all levels, and to work with the European Union to develop a reform plan known as the 'Reform Agenda'. The main goal was to accelerate Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress towards EU membership.

On February 15, 2016, Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted a formal application for membership in the European Union. In December, the European Commission handed B&H a questionnaire, which allows the EU to assess a country's readiness to begin the accession process. Almost 1,200 people participated in the preparation of the answers to the questionnaire, and over 20,000 pages of text were prepared, all of which were submitted in February 2018 to the European Commission.

In June 2018, the European Commission submitted to the Council of Ministers an additional 655 questions to be answered to prepare an Opinion on Bosnia and

Herzegovina's application for membership in the European Union. B&H submitted answers in March 2019 (with a five-month delay).

In May 2019, the European Commission issued an Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's application for membership in the European Union. The document identified fourteen key priorities that the country needed to achieve to open EU accession negotiations. It mentioned the need to undertake comprehensive reforms to ensure the stability of institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities.

It was stated that Bosnia and Herzegovina is at an early stage when it comes to the level of readiness to take on the obligations arising from membership in the European Union. In December 2019, the EU Council adopted conclusions on the abovementioned Commission opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's application. Accord-



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ing to a May 2021 survey by Transparency International, two years after publishing the European Commission's Opinion, only one of the fourteen priorities had been fully implemented in a way that creates formal preconditions for its fulfillment, while five priorities were partially realized.

When it comes to the public's position on the accession process, the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are mostly in favor of entry into the EU. According to a survey conducted in October 2020 by the Directorate for European Integration<sup>15</sup>, which operates as an agent of B&H Council of Ministers, as many as 3/4 of citizens would vote for the country's entry into the EU, and the reasons for this are primarily a guarantee of lasting peace and political stability, and increased freedom of movement for people, goods, and capital.

According to the same research, B&H citizens believe that the EU is interested in Bosnia and Herzegovina becoming a member because of its natural resources and ensuring stability and peace, as well as professional and skilled workers. This is probably a perception based on the current trend of departure of skilled labor. It is estimated that half a million residents left the B&H in nine years,<sup>16</sup> mostly to EU countries for work. This is a lot for a country that, according to the last census from 2013, had 3.5 million inhabitants.

## CURRENT CHALLENGES

There are many challenges that Bosnia and Herzegovina face on its path to the EU. First, these reasons are political in nature. According to the European Parliamentary

<sup>15</sup> <http://vpi.ba/en/2021/08/12/bih-citizens-support-for-eu-accession-how-relevant-is-it/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/balkan/bih-za-devet-godina-napustilo-skoro-pola-miliona-gradana-ljudi-najviše-odlaze-zbog-destabilne-političke-situacije/2452190> [in Bosnian]



## THE CITIZENS OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA ARE MOSTLY IN FAVOR OF ENTRY INTO THE EU

Research Service<sup>17</sup>, Bosnia and Herzegovina received around EUR 1.19 billion in pre-accession funding between 2007 and 2020. However, according to a 2020 report by the European Commission<sup>18</sup>, the commitment of representatives of all levels of government to achieving the EU's strategic goals of integration remained largely declarative, without specifically undertaken activities.

Adopting the European Commission's 2019/2020 report for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the European Parliament sent a clear message welcoming the efforts made so far to become an EU member. However, many more reforms are still needed – especially those that relate to the efficient functioning of independent and accountable democratic institutions, which are contained in the fourteen priorities<sup>19</sup>. Bosnia and Herzegovina has also not implemented key economic

<sup>17</sup> <https://cor.europa.eu/en/events/Documents/CIVEX/6th-enlargement-day/Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina%20-%20Difficult%20path%20towards%20EU%20membership.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/bosnia\\_and\\_herzegovina\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/bosnia_and_herzegovina_report_2020.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/evropski-parlament-usvojo-rezoliciju-o-bih/31324670.html> [in Bosnian]



reforms<sup>20</sup>, leading to modest economic growth of 2-3% per year<sup>21</sup> during the period of 2015-2020<sup>22</sup>, which is insufficient in line with the existing development base.

From all the above, it can be concluded that Bosnia and Herzegovina's path to EU membership has been halted for the time being. The situation has been further aggravated by the war in Ukraine and fears that the conflict could spread to the Western Balkans. Therefore, the European Union has sent an additional 500 troops to Bosnia and Herzegovina as a precaution in case of any instability<sup>23</sup>.

Some experts believe<sup>24</sup> that Vladimir Putin might want to expand the conflict into Bosnia and Herzegovina in a bid to divert the attention of the West from Ukraine. The sending of EUFOR troops to B&H speaks as a precautionary measure. In addition, EUFOR stated that 3,500 reserve forces were on standby and could be deployed at any time<sup>25</sup>. Apart from soldiers, military equipment was also sent, including armored personnel carriers and unarmored vehicles<sup>26</sup>.

As announced in early March 2022, French military planes will fly over Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to, according to EUFOR,

show the EU's commitment to a safe and stable environment in the country<sup>27</sup>. The Ukrainian crisis could very quickly turn into the Balkan crisis, and the highest price would be paid by Bosnia and Herzegovina as the greatest victim of the wars fought in the 1990s. Russia's ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Igor Kalbukhov said that the country could suffer the same fate as Ukraine if it decides to join NATO<sup>28</sup>. Certainly, the increased interest of the European Union in the fate of the country can be beneficial to its European path.

Due to this danger, former high representatives in B&H, Valentin Inzko and Cristian Schwarz Shilling<sup>29</sup>, addressed the European Commission, demanding that the European Union admit Bosnia and Herzegovina to membership as quickly and unbureaucratically as possible. In their address, the presidents of the European Commission stated that Serbia and Bosnian entity Republic of Srpska did not achieve their goals during the 1990s (the Greater Serbia ideology meaning 'all Serbs living in one state'), and that there is a risk that they could try to achieve that again.

Another reason that is blocking the EU path is the strengthening of nationalist and separatist rhetoric coming from one member of the Presidency of B&H, Milorad Dodik. He openly threatens the sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as the constitutional order and implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which poses a security threat. The UN High Representative for

<sup>20</sup> The text of Reform Agenda for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2015-2018 is available here: <https://europa.ba/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Reform-Agenda-BiH.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/rer\\_qr\\_2021\\_bhs.pdf](https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/rer_qr_2021_bhs.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=BA>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/eu-boosts-bosnia-force-after-russias-invasion-of-ukraine>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/serbias-loyalty-to-putin-threatens-renewed-conflict-in-the-heart-of-europe/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/oklopna-vozila-eufora-pristizu-u-bih-preko-prijelaza-u-bosanskom-samcu/220306059> [in Bosnian]

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/svijet/francuski-vojni-avioni-u-narednim-danima-obavljat-ce-trenazne-letove-bh-nebom/220305040> [in Bosnian]

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-bosnia-herzegovina-ukraine-nato-b2038436.html>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.dw.com/hr/apel-biv%C5%A1ih-visokih-predstavnika-za-brzi-prijam-bih-u-eu/a-60985759> [in Bosnian]



AS PRESIDENT  
VOLODYMYR  
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PARLIAMENT,  
AND WINS SUPPORT  
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Bosnia and Herzegovina, Valentin Inzko, said in May 2021 that Milorad Dodik was pursuing a policy aimed at disintegrating the country. This is why the implementation of the reforms set before B&H for it to become a member of the EU is at a complete standstill.

Political representatives of the Bosniak Serbs blocked the work of state institutions. They want to show that B&H cannot function and exists as an independent and sovereign state. Because of all these actions, many European countries are considering imposing sanctions on Milorad Dodik, his associates, and the companies associated with them<sup>30</sup>. The U.S. Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control imposed sanctions on him in January 2022<sup>31</sup>, and similar decisions are expected in European countries in the coming months.

Although the EU adopted in 2018 a new enlargement strategy for the Balkans, in which it acknowledged a "historic window of opportunity" for binding the six countries that are still not members with the European Union, another challenge is strengthening right-wing movements within the EU that are blocking the progress. Contrarian voices within the EU that seek to slow down – or even stop – enlargement in the Balkans continue to be effective at stopping the efforts of the Balkan countries to advance the process<sup>32</sup>.

When it comes to B&H, there is another aspect that complicates the accession process. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a predominantly Muslim country, with more of 50% of Muslims living there. These are European Muslims – mostly representatives of the Bosniak nation. Right-wing policies within the EU, such as Orbán's or Janša's do not favor the idea of joining a predominantly Muslim country within the EU. The political arena is riddled with anti-immigration

<sup>30</sup> See, for example: <https://hr.n1info.com/english/news/uk-confirm-their-support-for-sanctions-against-bosnian-serb-leader-dodik/>

<sup>31</sup> More at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0549>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/the-eu-should-resist-moves-to-halt-balkan-enlargement/>

attitudes, which are often presented as xenophobic.

Anti-immigrant extremist attitudes in Europe can be classified as racist, which is confirmed by the fact that 38% of Europeans believe that immigration outside the EU is a bigger problem than an opportunity<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, poll results show that support for EU membership is strongest in Bosnia's Muslim (Bosniak) community (with 97% in favor), followed by 85% of Bosnian Croats, and 78% of Bosnian Serbs<sup>34</sup>.

Dodik's renewed, purposeful and increased usage of the term 'Muslim' aims to reduce the entire Bosniak people to a religious group only, and portray them as foreigners in Europe. He finds open support from Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, and Janez Janša, the Prime Minister of Slovenia, two of the most xenophobic and openly vocal anti-Muslim leaders in Europe<sup>35</sup>. These politicians seem united in what they call the 'defense of Europe,' a familiar line that was often used in the 1990s<sup>36</sup>.

## POTENTIAL SCENARIOS AND ALTERNATIVES

As President Volodymyr Zelensky gets a standing ovation in the European Parliament, and wins support for Ukraine's EU membership application, Western Balkan would-be EU members, stuck in the waiting room for years, are wondering what this may

<sup>33</sup> <https://vpi.ba/en/2021/07/09/epidemic-of-neo-nazism-in-europe/>

<sup>34</sup> Brljavac, B. (2011) "Europeanisation Process of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Responsibility of the European Union?", *Balkanologie*, Vol.XIII(1-2).

<sup>35</sup> See, for example: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/10/hungarys-orban-vows-defence-of-christian-europe>, and: <https://www.total-slovenia-news.com/politics/2442-jansa-calls-on-european-people-party-s-to-defend-europe-from-cultural-marxism-islam>

<sup>36</sup> <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/in-bosnia-the-eastern-question-is-rising-again/>



THERE ARE CURRENTLY THREE SCENARIOS FOR BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA IN TERMS OF ITS POSITION IN/ TOWARD THE EU

mean for them<sup>37</sup>. Membership in the European Union should certainly be a priority for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region. This move will ensure peace and open the opportunity for economic progress, entry into the European Union market, greater freedom of trade in goods and services, and the access to various projects that will ultimately contribute to the country's development. Therefore, the current historical moment should be taken advantage of and, possibly – following the example of Ukraine and Georgia, – the EU should be formally asked to accept B&H as a member due to the security threats that the country is facing. This idea is currently gaining more traction in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Due to the delay in the process of joining the European Union, the Open Balkans initiative emerged as one of the opportunities for freer trade of goods and services between the Western Balkans and non-EU countries. Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia

<sup>37</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/07/western-balkans-eu-hopes-rise-amid-clamour-of-war/>

already entered several agreements on the introduction of numerous privileges and facilitation in business.

On the other hand, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro did not join the initiative for fear that it would strengthen Serbia's influence in the region. If Bosnia and Herzegovina joined the Open Balkans, and if the idea comes to life, the exchange of goods between the countries of the Western Balkans could be intensified. This is the reason why the initiative is called 'Mini Schengen'. Economically, the "Open Balkans" goes beyond the previous CEFTA agreement and offers better integration of the region. Moreover, it also has the support of Western European countries, which have urged Montenegro to join it<sup>38</sup>.

Another scenario is economic integration with the European Union. Without a clear prospect of enlargement, the countries of the Balkans will remain exposed to the destabilizing forces (nationalism that led to the war in the 1990s with hundreds of thousands of victims). This solution would come in handy to those actors who are already seeking influence over the Balkans – Russia, Turkey, the Arab states, and China are trying to expand their influence across the Balkans, whether covertly, through soft power, or through targeted investments<sup>39</sup>. Considering that EU accession seems to be still some way for most or all of the Western Balkans, an interim step in economic terms needs to be considered.

However, many fear half measures, and understandably: it can look like second-class membership which could become permanent. Yet, it is certainly better than the *status*

<sup>38</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/01/18/montenegro-being-urged-to-join-risky-open-balkan-initiative-analyst/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://ba.boell.org/en/2019/05/23/what-direction-western-balkans-more-right-wing-eu>



## EU INTEGRATION IS A GUARANTEE OF PEACE AND SECURITY FOR BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, AND, CONSEQUENTLY, FOR THE ENTIRE WESTERN BALKANS

*quo* and could provide many of the economic benefits of accession ahead of full membership. This, in turn, might help the region to start bridging the gap in terms of economic development when compared to the European Union and Central and Eastern Europe. This could include fuller integration into the EU single market and customs union, greater access to the EU budget (with the necessary conditionality attached), and more direct EU support for industrial development in the Western Balkans. This, however, implies that a deepening of regional ties is more a consequence of, rather than a prerequisite for, EU accession<sup>40</sup>.

In short, there are currently three scenarios for Bosnia and Herzegovina in terms of its position in/toward the EU: entry of the

<sup>40</sup> <https://biepag.eu/blog/western-balkan-economic-integration-with-the-eu-time-for-more-ambition/>



## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA SHOULD NOT SHY AWAY FROM TEMPORARY SOLUTIONS

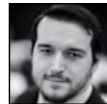
Western Balkans into the European Union as the best way forward, and Open Balkan initiative as well as the economic integration with the EU as temporary or second-best options. Still, each of these alternatives is better than the current stagnation, which is why Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to start on one of these routes soon.

### CONCLUSIONS

EU integration is a guarantee of peace and security for Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, consequently, for the entire Western Balkans. This is precisely what the citizens of this country believe, as exemplified above. However, at the moment, the process of accession is at a standstill, mostly due to the inaction of the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the current political crisis.

Of course, there are certain forces within the European Union that are blocking the accession process – from the current Ukrainian crisis and the consequences for the Western Balkans, through the strengthening of right-wing movements within B&H, but also the EU, with the failure to meet the basic conditions for entry.

At this point, it is extremely important that the accession process continues. At the same time, Bosnia and Herzegovina should not shy away from temporary solutions. These alternative paths could include the Open Balkans initiative or economic integration with the European Union. A common future is the ultimate goal, and so now is the right time to turn it into action



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