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**AFTER OPENING  
ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS:  
WHAT IS NEXT FOR BOSNIA  
AND HERZEGOVINA?**

In the 4:1 series of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, four experts give a short answer to the same question concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch scientific debates in and beyond Hungary and to promote dialogue among experts. In this issue, our topic is *“After Opening Accession Negotiations: What is Next for Bosnia and Herzegovina?”*

## Nina Sajić

It was a rude awakening for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in December 2023 when the EU decided to open accession talks only with Ukraine and Moldova, while membership talks with BiH were **conditioned** with a “necessary degree of compliance with membership criteria”. Three months later, the EU decided to open membership negotiations with BiH. “Great geopolitical message”, “key step forward”, and “historic breakthrough” were just some of the reactions of European officials to the EU’s recent decision.

The country was granted an EU candidate country status in December 2022, almost seven years after the country officially applied for EU membership. While some insist that the latest decision was geopolitically driven, others still believe that it was merit-based. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission **said** that BiH had made more progress “in just over a year than in a whole decade”. However, it now appears as if the EU has taken a different approach towards the enlargement, or as Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi **emphasized** “the enlargement is more than ever a geostrategic investment in our shared prosperity and security.”

Whether this decision will bring about only symbolic or tangible changes in the country will depend on various internal and external factors. Contrary to popular belief, the direction that BiH might take will not so much be affected by internal dynamics or by the Russian, Turkish, or Chinese influence in the country, as much it will be dependent on divergent EU and American views on the international presence in BiH.

The issue of the strong international presence has often been seen as the main obstacle to the EU integration of the country. On numerous occasions, and most recently after the amendments to the Election Law were imposed by the OHR<sup>1</sup>, the EU

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1 Office of the High Representative (OHR) was created under the Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina as an ad hoc international body responsible for overseeing civilian implementation of the agreement.

has underlined that extensive international presence is incompatible with the European future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the other hand, the US continues to strongly support the OHR presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as all the decisions that have been imposed so far, including the latest one.

The strong international presence that intervenes in the functioning of the country, but is accountable to nobody, directly contends the values that the EU is funded on: human dignity, freedom, democracy, human rights, equality, and the rule of law. It also undermines the fostering of the culture of internal dialogue and concession-making, which are necessary for any country striving to join the EU. The EU has made it clear once again that the closure of the OHR is a very important condition that is to be met before the negotiation talks with BiH could be closed. In other words, the EU integration of the country cannot be in full swing with international tutelage. As the US is against the closure of the OHR, at least at the moment, it seems like neither BiH nor the EU will have a say in the country's European path, but the US. If the EU sincerely wants to see BiH as a member of the European family, it is high time the EU spoke with its American partners about the future of the country.

## Anna Orosz

It is likely that the decision of the EU to open accession talks with Bosnia and Herzegovina surprised the Bosnian politicians themselves the most. Although several required laws (for example money laundering, prevention of financing terrorism, and preventing conflicts of interest) were adopted within a couple of weeks and months, the outcome of the Council's meeting in March 2024 could not have been taken for granted. The increased joint efforts of the representatives from all three constituent peoples on the state level despite the high-level political tensions in the country demonstrated that common political will can be still created if there is a real window of opportunity. Nonetheless, the current situation is also a good example of how limited the EU's normative power is and that future similar progress might be only the result of geostrategic considerations.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has been facing a rocky path towards the European Union ever since it chose that as a strategic direction. Preparation for candidacy and accession negotiations has been accompanied by a contested state-building process. The EU conditionality in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina combines requirements related to both processes and accordingly goes beyond the usual negotiation framework and pre-define the state reform agenda for BiH. As in the case of the latter, there is a lack of consensus among the representatives of the constituent peoples, and the EU got into an awkward situation in which it cannot enforce its conditions under increasing geopolitical and time pressure. This contributed significantly to the erosion of its normative power. Instead from time to time, it must redefine its own conditions, and find new compromises while trying to remain also credible and predictable.

When political leaders in BiH jointly applied for EU membership in 2016, [there was a significant will shared by the political actors in BiH](#). Unfortunately, decision-makers in the EU did not recognize the importance of or were unwilling to grab that opportunity and consequently lost leverage in BiH to a large extent. As a consequence of wasting time in the EU's waiting room, both political elites and citizens lost enthusiasm towards the EU. The EU accession agenda can no longer be used as a political tool to mobilize voters even though 52% of the people still believe that EU accession is a good thing ([Balkan Barometer 2023](#)). Considering this, it could be assumed that the continuation of the EU reform agenda will be highly dependent on the additional financial and economic incentives attached to the political agenda. Otherwise, political actors will simply return to the business as usual.

A couple of weeks before the Council's decision, [Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia visited Sarajevo](#) – along with Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and Mark Rutte, Dutch Prime Minister – and urged to grasp what he said were “tectonic” changes in EU policies because of Ukraine and warned that “if we miss March, the whole year will be lost” because of the upcoming EP elections. Luckily, the opportunity was not missed by either side, but it remains questionable whether commitments within BiH and the EU will be sustained. The New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans neither in terms of financial means nor concreteness implies to an ambitious future EU enlargement agenda towards the Western Balkans which is not a surprise before the EP elections. However, the EU won't be in the position to turn its back on the Western Balkans and Bosnia and Herzegovina for too long as in the light of the increasing tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider region will require a new credible window of opportunity as soon as possible. Otherwise, Bosnia and Herzegovina will be the next candidate which has started the negotiations without doing so in practice.

## Senada Šelo Šabić

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is to start the accession negotiations with the European Union following a decision of the European Council on 21 March 2024 that has been a long wait, reflecting reservations in some member states about BiH's preparedness for the negotiations.

Many applauded the EU's green light to BiH. Ursula von der Leyen stated that the country had made considerable progress and, therefore, deserved to start the negotiations. She also did not hide that the decision was driven by geopolitical considerations, considering the war in Ukraine and Russian influence in the Balkans.

Underneath this “historic decision” lies an uneasy story of the country's complicated political, economic, demographic, social, and security situation. The expectation of financial gain from the EU accession drove the interests of BiH

politicians, in particular from the entity Republika Srpska (RS), to vote for the necessary laws that qualified BiH in the eyes of the EU as ready to start the negotiations.

Serb elected officials demonstrate no desire to bring BiH closer to the EU. They do not embrace European values, promise solidarity, or invest in a vision of a common European future. Bosniaks and Croats, despite their separate agendas, are inclined to endorse BiH's future in the EU, which rests not only on potential economic gain but also on alignment with the EU's values. A camp of civic Bosnian parties is small and value-driven, but their voice is limited in the current political makeup. However, there remains a potential for progressive democratic politics in BiH oriented towards EU membership.

In RS, however, the heart is in Russia, while the stomach is in the EU. If only Russia was a true global power and if only geography were different, RS leadership would prefer its people to be a part of the Russian rather than the Western world. As in Russia, 24 March was the official day of mourning in RS for the victims of the terrorist attack on 22 March. Flags flew at half-mast.

On 26 March, less than a week after the accession path opened, Christian Schmidt, the High Representative for BiH imposed changes to the election law that guarantee more transparency and integrity. The message from the RS was immediate—this ends BiH's EU accession path. Why? Because they never seriously wanted it unless the EU gave them money and asked about nothing else.

BiH will never succeed in acceding to the EU with the current political system because, among else, of veto powers built into the system. The Bosnian Serb leadership is only buying time—hoping that the EU continues to reward its blackmail with concessions, that Donald Trump returns to the White House, that Russia wins in Ukraine, that China wins the economic war.

The West is in decline, explained on 5 April by the Hungarian Prime Minister in Banja Luka on the occasion of a high-level Hungarian visit to RS. Viktor Orbán and Milorad Dodik are good friends, and a friend in need is a friend indeed. Viktor Orbán promised help to the financially strained Serb entity, assured political support at the EU level, criticized the High Representative in BiH and received a high award from Milorad Dodik that previously was given only to Vladimir Putin, Sergey Lavrov, and Aleksandar Vučić. The award symbolizes the day of the establishment of the RS entity, which the BiH constitutional court proclaimed unconstitutional. By receiving this award, Viktor Orbán is negating BiH's highest judicial institution.

Milorad Dodik says he and his politicians are legalists; they want to follow the written word in the Dayton peace agreement. Yet, their pledge to legality appears limited. They do not respect decisions of BiH institutions, for example, the BiH constitutional court; rulings of European legal institutions, for example, the European Court for Human Rights; or judgements of international judicial bodies, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Disrespect

for inter-Bosnian dialogue, indifference to obligations BiH assumed to start EU accession, and disregard for the interests of BiH citizens discloses RS leadership's intentions—to wreck BiH. By doing so, they risk shattering a hard-won peace.

The stakes are high. A key challenge in BiH today is not the EU path but preserving the state and protecting peace.

## Ferenc Németh

Deserved or not, at the end of the day, it does not matter. What does matter is whether political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) would seek momentum and how EU capitals will be able to pressure them to move on with the hard-hitting reforms, if necessary. “Now the hard work needs to continue so Bosnia and Herzegovina steadily advances, as your people want”, Charles Michel, President of the European Council [tweeted](#). The so-called hard work, in fact, only starts now, and BiH must be kept under spotlight and political scrutiny.

The [decision](#) to open accession negotiations with BiH is morally justifiable yet leaves a lot to be desired from the technical perspective. EU institutions did not seize the opportunity when there was a chance to advance with a more reform-minded leadership in BiH a decade ago and set unusually high requirements even for getting a candidate status. On the other hand, BiH still performed poorly in delivering any tangible progress on the European Commission's [14 key priorities](#) (set in 2019) that are supposed to be prerequisites for the country's EU accession. Although BiH did achieve some progress in technical fields (including newly adopted laws against money laundering financing terrorism and preventing conflict of interests) but failed to address any of the mainly politically driven topics such as constitutional and electoral reforms.

The decision to open accession negotiations with BiH was detrimental to the EU. This, almost purely political act symbolizes that the EU is still committed to the country's European integration and wants to rebuild its fading credibility. Even sceptical EU member states, such as France and the Netherlands, have joined EU institutions and pro-enlargement countries in emphasizing the importance of BiH's EU accession. This is primarily [viewed](#) as a means of promoting regional stability, and economic prosperity, and countering malign (mainly Russian) influences.

Opening accession negotiations finally gives the EU proper leverage over the political elites of BiH and a platform for the country's citizens to be able to make their politicians accountable for their actions – or the lack thereof. By moving on with accession talks by agreeing on the negotiating framework, the EU could energize BiH's European integration both externally (connecting financial benefits to internal reforms) and internally. As the latter, the greatest test for the EU is the ongoing political crisis to which it could demonstrate its willingness to engage, its leverage over local politicians, and ability to defuse situations that [pose a threat](#) to BiH's territorial integrity.

From Hungary's perspective, working on speeding up enlargement, and maintaining local and regional security are of the utmost importance in BiH. The Hungarian EU Presidency in 2024 aims to keep these in mind and work on, under difficult political circumstances, keeping BiH's EU path on the right track. Technical assistance in understanding EU laws and military presence of EUFOR Althea, led by a [Hungarian commander](#), demonstrate Hungary's genuine interest in the European future for BiH. Hungary shows proactivity and willingness to engage with all politicians, even if it is perceived as harmful or controversial, to potentially facilitate cooperation among (local and international) actors. To achieve this goal, BiH institutions must now deliver on the reforms and, first and foremost, show a constructive approach to agreeing on the negotiating framework and fulfilling the conditions attached to it.

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