

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Difficult path towards EU membership

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), alongside other Western Balkans countries, was identified as a potential candidate for EU membership during the European Council's Thessaloniki summit of June 2003. BiH applied for EU membership in February 2016. The Commission adopted its opinion on BiH's EU membership application in May 2019, but internal political instability and lack of political reforms have dampened the country's prospects of joining the EU.

Background

The [stabilisation and association agreement](#) (SAA) with BiH entered into force in June 2015. In its 2019 [opinion](#), the European Commission identified 14 key priorities for the country to fulfil before the EU could open accession negotiations with it. The opinion laid out a comprehensive roadmap for deep reforms in the areas of democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights and public administration. However, as stated in the 2020 Commission [report](#) on BiH, 'political commitment of the authorities at all levels of government to the strategic goal of European integration remained to a large extent merely declarative and was not turned into concrete actions'. The EU continues to support BiH on its path to membership: BiH has [received](#) €1.19 billion in EU pre-accession funds (2007-2020). Yet, accession remains a distant prospect because of internal instability and political disputes. The [EUFOR-Althea](#) CSDP mission has around 600 troops in BiH, with an executive mandate to maintain a stable and secure environment in the country.

New challenges

Some 25 years after the signing of the [General Framework Agreement for Peace](#) (the Dayton Agreement, 1995), the constitutional setting in BiH remains an issue. Based on the Dayton Agreement, the BiH [constitution](#) requires that the posts in two key institutions, the three-member Presidency and the parliamentary House of Peoples, be equally divided among Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. However, tensions between the two territorial entities (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Republika Srpska), and the three ethnic communities, known as the constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats), have been [growing](#) recently. The UN High Representative for BiH, [Valentin Inzko](#), said in May 2021 that Milorad Dodik, the leader of Republika Srpska, was pursuing the political 'agenda of breaking up the country'.

Internal political disputes between the Federation and Republika Srpska were compounded by the fragile situation created by the pandemic. In 2020, BiH slipped into the worst [recession](#) in its history, when GDP contracted by 4.3 % mainly because of the spike in Covid-19 cases and the drop in consumption. The [World Bank](#) expects economic growth to reach 2.8 % in 2021; the timing and pace of recovery is highly uncertain and is below the regional average of 4.4 %. Shortages in the healthcare system and deep-seated problems of governance have led to [street protests](#) calling for the government to resign. The EU has provided help with some 214 000 doses on the initiative of the Commission and Austria, [announced](#) in April 2021.

European Parliament position

The Foreign Affairs Committee [report](#) on the 2019-2020 Commission reports recalls that BiH's EU prospects depend on sustainable peace and genuine reconciliation warranting the democratic and multicultural character of the country. It also urges BiH to 'significantly accelerate' work and cooperation to fully comply with the 14 key priorities of 2019. Following the [humanitarian crisis](#) in the Una-Sana Canton (Bihać) in the winter of 2019-2020, MEPs also call for effective interinstitutional coordination of migration and border management in the face of rising pressure from the presence of some [9 000 irregular migrants](#) in the country.

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PE 690.659 – June 2021



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