

REVIEW PAPER

STRATEGIC INTEGRATION AND GEOPOLITICAL REPOSITIONING: BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA'S PATH TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN UNION

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ABSTRACT

Bosnia and Herzegovina, rich in cultural diversity, is challenged by religious, national, and ethnic divides, leading to societal deadlock. Despite making strides towards internal peace and security, ongoing economic struggles continue to hamper its development. As the country advances towards European integration, prioritizing its own interests and goals is crucial, rather than merely aligning with those of the European Union. The country needs to meet fourteen key conditions to open negotiations for joining the EU. These conditions can serve as a guiding framework to transform the state from its current negative geopolitical position into one where it can become an engaged player in international relations. Its diverse constituent peoples already have established influences with peoples from diverse backgrounds such as Arab and Muslim countries, the European Union's member states, Russia, and the Eastern European states. These influences have never been utilized in a coordinated and constructive way, but were rather always seen through the prism of conflict. The state can leverage these relationships and position itself as a symbolic bridge between the Western, Eastern, and Muslim Arab worlds. This strategic geopolitical repositioning will not only enhance Bosnia and Herzegovina's prospects for a brighter future for its citizens but also enable it to play a significant role in regional dynamics. Focused on its unique interests and values, Bosnia and Herzegovina must ensure its voice and values are reflected in the European integration process, shaping a beneficial future, lasting stability, and long-term prosperity for its citizens and the region.

Keywords: Cultural Diversity, Internal Challenges, Economic Struggles, European Integration, Geopolitical Repositioning, Strategic Relationships



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Historical context

Bosnia and Herzegovina finds itself at a crucial juncture in its history. Located in southeastern Europe on the Balkan Peninsula, specifically in its western part, the country borders the European Union, making it a key partner for the EU, with which it seeks to build a strong relationship and eventually integrate into its complex and diverse structure.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s marked a significant shift in Eastern Europe's geopolitical landscape. Yugoslavia, then the only remaining communist country in Europe, faced immense pressure to transform its internal structure. This was part of a broader effort to spread Western democratic ideals throughout Eastern Europe. The state, having been ruled for forty-five years by a single party, held its first multi-party elections in 1990. These elections saw the rise of mono-national parties, in stark contrast to the wider state's multi-national character, leading to significant tensions among its diverse peoples (Glaudić, Filipović, & Lesschaeve, 2022). As these tensions were brewing, Serbia, under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević, sought to gain control over Yugoslavia by installing aligned politicians in Vojvodina, Kosovo, and Montenegro. This move effectively gave Serbia four votes in the Yugoslav state council, leading to its dysfunction and signalling to the republics the necessity of independence (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1995). Bosnia and Herzegovina declared its independence on March 1st, 1992, following a referendum where the majority of citizens voted to leave the troubled state that Yugoslavia was becoming. However, one-third of its population opposed independence, leading to the formation of a separate political entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina. This period of upheaval culminated in a devastating conflict that lasted three years, ending with the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995 (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2020). This agreement marked a significant moment in European history, halting one of the largest conflicts on the continent since World War II. At the same time of these troubling political scenarios, the Maastricht Treaty in Western Europe transformed the European Community into the European Union, giving it a more pronounced political dimension and setting the stage for deeper political integration among its members (Britannica, 1992). The Yugoslav wars significantly delayed the integration of Western Balkan countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, into the EU. To this day, these nations are in the process of joining the EU. The political forces that led war-time efforts and eventually brokered peace continue to hold power

in many of the former Yugoslav republics. The Dayton Peace Accords, while successful in ending the bloodshed, merely ensured peace. The conflict persisted in non-traditional forms, particularly through the quest for power and economic dominance of political forces of the time. This ongoing frozen conflict has slowed Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress towards EU integration, making it a crawl rather than a sprint, thus its citizens need to become politically engaged to unfreeze this conflict and eventually speed up and amplify the European Union integration process.

As Bosnia and Herzegovina navigates through a tumultuous post-conflict period, significant historical events have shaped its current challenges and aspirations towards European Union integration. This paper aims to unravel the complexities surrounding Bosnia and Herzegovina's current standing and to highlight the important steps needed for its transformation and integration into the European Union. Understanding these intricacies is vital for comprehending the country's unique position as the crossroads of different cultural and political influences. This study offers insights into the country's journey, emphasizing the reconciliation of diverse internal interests and values, and sheds light on the broader implications for regional stability and European integration.

Navigating the European Union's accession roadmap

In 2016, Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted its application for the European Union's membership, thus starting the long process which will require a tremendous effort to fulfil all necessary criteria for joining. This marked the beginning of a challenging journey, which requires substantial efforts to meet the EU's criteria. In 2019, the European Commission sent out its opinion on the application and set out fourteen priorities, which are classified into four categories and related to democracy and functionality of the state, the rule of law, fundamental rights, and public administration reform (The European Commission, 2019). These priorities form a comprehensive roadmap for deep reforms essential for accession negotiations, thus all of these have to be implemented if Bosnia and Herzegovina will become the part of European project. At the current speed, it will take decades to implement all aspects of the opinion, but if instead of crawling toward the European Union, Bosnia and Herzegovina starts sprinting, then following policies can be implemented in this decade. Its citizens need to become politically active and organize grassroots movements to unfreeze internal conflict and speed

up this process. Most importantly, the state should join the European project for its own good and not the good of the European Union. After Bosnia and Herzegovina fulfills fourteen conditions of the European Union, the negotiation for joining will start. The integration process for Bosnia and Herzegovina, similar to other Western Balkan countries like Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, is fraught with challenges. These include internal political instability, sluggish reforms, and regional disputes. The European Commission's new enlargement methodology, introduced in 2020, emphasizes the importance of rule of law and economic reforms, aiming to make the accession negotiations more credible and dynamic (European Parliament, 2020).

Political integration often involves a balance of sacrifice and contribution, where countries cede certain powers to a higher authority in exchange for collective benefits. The extent of power relinquished varies with the level of integration. States that fail to negotiate these terms effectively risk losing their distinct political identity, subsumed by larger, more powerful entities. A fitting metaphor to illustrate this is the integration of a chicken and a pig in producing breakfast like eggs and bacon. In this scenario, the chicken (representing a country like Bosnia and Herzegovina) contributes eggs without sacrificing its existence. In contrast, the pig, providing bacon, symbolizes a state making a more substantial, often irreversible, sacrifice. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, its journey towards EU integration should mirror the chicken's role – contributing to the collective good while preserving its sovereignty and cultural identity. By carefully negotiating its terms of integration, Bosnia and Herzegovina can ensure its continued existence and prosperity within the European Union. Thus, the implementation of European standards is crucial not just for aligning with the EU but for the nation's own sustained benefit and growth.

Democracy and State Functionality

The first priority that the Commission set out for Bosnia and Herzegovina is related to organizing elections in line with European standards. This includes holding municipal elections in the city of Mostar and introducing transparency in political party financing. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) and the Venice Commission offer expertise in electoral processes, assisting governments in implementing recommendations on voter registration, campaign finance, media coverage, and dispute resolution mechanisms. Such collaborations are crucial for ensuring transparent, free, and fair elections. One

of the most significant challenges to the integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina's electoral process is the undue influence of money in politics. While political parties and candidates require funding for their campaigns, the lack of transparency in financing can lead to corruption, inequality, and unfair advantages. Effective governance necessitates implementing measures to ensure transparency in political party financing, such as mandating disclosure of funding sources, setting contribution limits, and imposing penalties for violations. The situation in Mostar, where elections were organized in 2020 after a twelve-year halt, exemplifies a broader state-level frozen conflict and deadlock. For eight years, the city was run by a mayor without a mandate, highlighting the unsustainable environment and the urgent need for reforms. In response to this, it's imperative for citizens to engage actively in the political processes, either by forming new political parties or becoming more involved in existing ones. This active participation is crucial as it's the only legal and viable way to enact change. Such civic engagement can drive the need for more transparent electoral processes, ultimately leading to broader societal changes and fairer representation of citizens' interests.

The second priority set for Bosnia and Herzegovina by the European Commission involves establishing an effective coordination mechanism for EU matters. This mechanism should include a diverse range of actors such as government ministries, local authorities, civil society organizations, and others. Effective communication and cooperation among these groups are crucial for a coordinated and consistent approach to EU integration. Additionally, a national programme for adopting the EU *acquis* is imperative. This programme should provide a clear and comprehensive roadmap, covering all relevant areas of the *acquis* with a defined timeline for implementation. Ensuring transparency and accountability in this process is vital for maintaining the credibility and legitimacy of EU integration efforts. Regular monitoring, evaluation of progress, and engagement with various stakeholders, including civil society, are key elements in this regard. Moreover, adequate resources and technical assistance are essential for implementing the national programme. The government must ensure necessary resource allocation and build the capacity and expertise of relevant actors through training and technical assistance. Streamlining the current governance structure, transitioning from thirteen separate governments and parliaments to a more functional and streamlined system, is crucial for the adoption and swift implementation of the national programme. A streamlined governance model

would enable a more efficient adoption of EU laws across the entire territory of the state. This restructuring would help overcome bureaucratic hurdles and inconsistencies, ensuring that reforms and EU standards are uniformly applied throughout the country. It would also enhance the state's ability to respond effectively to EU requirements and facilitate a smoother integration process. Moreover, simplifying the multi-tiered legal and regulatory framework is essential for improving Bosnia and Herzegovina's investment climate. Currently, the complexity of its governance structure, with duplicative and contradictory regulations across various levels of government, deters foreign investment and hampers economic growth. Reducing the number of governments would simplify these processes, making the country more attractive to investors and aiding in economic development (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

Expanding on the third condition set by the European Commission for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU integration, we can delve into the functioning of the Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC) and the challenges in decision-making processes. The SAPC's establishment and its operationalization represent a significant step towards Bosnia and Herzegovina's alignment with EU standards. In 2020, after a prolonged period of stalemate, Members of Parliament agreed on the rules of procedure for the EU-Bosnia SAPC. This development, hailed as a fulfilment of one of the fourteen priorities set by the European Commission, was critical in advancing the country's EU integration process (European Western Balkans, 2020). One of the key elements of this agreement was the decision-making procedure within the SAPC. The members agreed that decisions would require a two-thirds majority, which indicates a move towards a more inclusive and consensus-oriented approach. However, this also suggests challenges in reaching agreements, given the requirement for a high level of concurrence among members. The European Parliament initially proposed a simple majority for decision-making within the SAPC. However, this was not feasible in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the country's frozen conflict among political forces and existing decision-making environment. The compromise to adopt a two-thirds majority reflects the unique political and constitutional context of Bosnia and Herzegovina and underscores the complexities inherent in aligning national procedures with European norms. In terms of enhancing this process, a key solution lies in fostering a political culture that values consensus and constructive dialogue. This shift would require political leaders and representatives to prioritize collective goals over individual

or party interests. Additionally, increasing the involvement of civil society and other stakeholders in the decision-making process could contribute to a more transparent and inclusive approach.

Upholding the Rule of Law

The fourth priority is related to the country's needs to undertake significant improvements to its legal and institutional framework in order to meet EU standards and requirements. This includes ensuring clarity on the distribution of powers among different levels of government inside the country. A substitution clause is a requirement so that the central government can temporarily assume powers of other levels of government to ensure compliance with EU laws. Streamlining the government structure would eliminate the need for this substitution clause, thus it will simplify the distribution of powers and improve policy coordination. This is particularly vital given the state's highly decentralized government consisting of two entities and ten cantons, where coordination is currently highly ineffectual. Another point is guaranteeing judicial independence, which Bosnia and Herzegovina is struggling to achieve. The European External Action Service (2023) highlights that post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina's judicial system faces challenges including lack of judicial independence and political interference (EEAS, 2023). Evidence indicates a compromised judicial system, such as the appointment of the ex-president of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council as an advisor to a member of the Presidency. The level of inefficiency and political influence on judicial system is very high, thus reforming the judicial system becomes crucial. Streamlining judicial system could enhance its independence, because of a clear line of responsibility, it would become much harder for judicial officials to engage in corrupt practices (Roccia, 2013). Also, reforming the Constitutional Court to address issues such as the presence of international judges and ensuring the enforcement of its decisions is critical. The establishment of a state-level Supreme Court would ensure consistent legal interpretation throughout the country. The last part of this priority is to ensure that all administrative bodies responsible for implementing EU laws are staffed with professionals and that veto rights are eliminated to ensure compliance with EU law. A streamlined government could address the dominance of mono-national political parties in upper houses of parliaments and make it feasible to reform veto rights. The current political elite may be resistant, but a mobilized citizenry and a streamlined government structure could be more conducive to these necessary changes for EU integration.

The fifth priority is related to addressing the legacy of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a significant hurdle to the country's development and EU integration. The conflict has left deep societal wounds, necessitating robust reconciliation efforts. These efforts should include promoting dialogue among various groups, such as political and civil society leaders, conflict victims, and citizens, to build trust and address grievances. A critical aspect of reconciliation is confronting the root causes of the conflict, including economic inequality, political exclusion, and ethnic and religious tensions. One notable issue is the differing history textbooks used in schools, perpetuating divergent historical narratives. It's essential to introduce new, more factually accurate history books that will focus on factual historical events instead of teaching opposing national narratives. This approach is vital not only for accurate historical understanding but also for preventing the repetition of past mistakes. The nation-building process in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been failure because of these varying educational curriculums, which teach opposing national narratives. This is particularly evident in the city of Mostar, where generations are raised with a sense of belonging to different nations despite settling and sharing the same city for centuries. Reforming the education system to accommodate a more unified and factual curriculum is crucial for repairing Mostar's and the broader state's nation-building process. Such educational reforms are pivotal for creating a more cohesive, peaceful future in alignment with EU integration objectives.

Expanding on the sixth priority regarding the improvement of Bosnia and Herzegovina's judiciary, it's essential to address the reform of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council and the Courts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. To further enhance the judicial system's integrity and independence, a comprehensive law and reform of these judicial bodies is a necessity (Post Conflict Research Center, 2023). This should involve a complete overhaul of its current structure and members, ensuring that new appointments are based on merit and free from political influence. Moreover, there should be a thorough investigation into the past actions of members of these bodies, because of damages that have been caused by inefficiency of these bodies. Any found instances of political manipulation or other misconduct must be addressed with appropriate penalties. This process is crucial not only for rectifying past mistakes but also for restoring public trust and ensuring the judiciary's commitment to impartiality and fairness. Such reforms would significantly strengthen the judicial system, reinforcing its role in upholding the rule of law and

protecting citizens' rights in alignment with European standards (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik, 2022).

The seventh condition for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU integration is focused on strengthening the fight against corruption and organized crime. This includes legislative reforms, enhancing the coordination of anti-corruption bodies, and improving law enforcement collaboration. The Sarajevo Times report on Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023) highlights some progress in the fight against organized crime, but notes no progress in combating corruption. The report also mentions operational inefficiencies and political interference as significant challenges. The judiciary's independence and impartiality have not improved, and there have been instances of executive and legislative overreach, undermining the rule of law and the fight against corruption and organized crime (Sarajevo Times, 2023). These findings indicate that Bosnia and Herzegovina faces substantial hurdles in meeting the seventh condition. The judicial system has intruded into legislative and executive branches, affecting political events in the country. The issues of judicial independence, political influence, and the lack of a robust anti-corruption framework are key areas that need addressing. The need for comprehensive reforms, especially in the judiciary and law enforcement, is crucial for Bosnia and Herzegovina to be perceived as a developed, democratic, and organized country.

Expanding on the eighth condition for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU candidacy, which focuses on border management and migration, several key aspects are evident. The European Commission has provided significant support to Bosnia and Herzegovina, including a €25 million assistance package to enhance migration management (European Commission, 2020). This funding primarily addresses the needs of refugees and migrants, including accommodation, healthcare, and social services, and strengthens Bosnia and Herzegovina's capacity in border management through equipment and training. It also contributes to the fight against migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. The EU expects Bosnia and Herzegovina to ensure effective coordination in managing migration and asylum, including taking over the management of EU-funded temporary reception centers. This ongoing support hinges on Bosnia and Herzegovina respecting domestic law and international obligations concerning the treatment of refugees and migrants. Additionally, Bosnia and Herzegovina has adopted a new strategy and action plan on migration and asylum, and a Law on foreigners. While there are still major weaknesses that undermine

the provision of necessary assistance, the country is making efforts to ensure access to asylum and strengthen border management. The state is satisfactorily implementing the integrated border management strategy and is advised to adopt the strategy and action plan for 2024–2029 in good time. These efforts are crucial, considering Bosnia and Herzegovina's potential role in managing the EU's external border, especially in light of uncertainty regarding Serbia's EU membership. Effective border management and handling of migration are critical steps in integrating Bosnia and Herzegovina into the European community and contributing to regional stability and security.

Safeguarding Fundamental Rights

The ninth condition for Bosnia and Herzegovina's candidacy for EU membership focuses on enhancing the protection of citizens' and minority rights. This is particularly important in the context of the country's political landscape, which is characterized by the dominance of mono-ethnic political parties. These parties, drawing support mainly from specific ethnic groups, reinforce societal divides and marginalize those outside their support base. This practice is contrary to the principles of non-discrimination. The European Commission, in its 2023 enlargement reports, has taken a close look at the progress of countries aspiring to EU membership, including Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Commission recommended starting accession negotiations with BiH, contingent upon meeting certain criteria, one of which involves addressing the role of actors who perpetuate divisions and inequality. The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that elections in BiH are undemocratic, entrenching the privileged position of dominant ethnic groups (Mared Gwyn Jones, 2023). The country's constitution grants political privileges to Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, as the constituent peoples. This arrangement results in the exclusion of people without affiliation to these groups from key political institutions, like the House of Peoples and the Presidency. In response to these issues, the European Commission spokesperson highlighted the necessity for BiH to implement reforms to ensure equality and non-discrimination of its citizens. Additionally, the Office of the High Representative's (OHR) attempts to reform election laws, intended to address these disparities, have been met with criticism and have not fully addressed the political discrimination against Jews, Roma, and other minorities. The election of a member of the Presidency from Croat constituent peoples has always been an unnecessary public debate focusing on internal within the state political representation, while the importance of exter-

nal political representation has never been a part of discussion. If the members of the Presidency were elected by the parliament instead of directly by citizens, it would fundamentally change the dynamic of this issue. Parliamentarians, as direct representatives of the people, could provide a more diverse and inclusive approach to selecting the Presidency. Such a shift could enhance political inclusivity and mitigate the current focus on national and ethnic identity, aligning more closely with EU principles and aiding Bosnia and Herzegovina's path toward EU integration. The transformation of the state's political party landscape and the implementation of comprehensive reforms in line with EU conditions are crucial for advancing the country's aspirations for EU membership. Addressing these political dynamics is essential for reducing ethnic and national divisions, promoting reconciliation, and aligning with the EU's principles of non-discrimination and gender equality. Without these changes, Bosnia and Herzegovina may continue to face challenges related to discrimination and inequality, impeding its progress towards EU integration.

The tenth step on Bosnia's path to the Union is to ensure the right to life and prohibition of torture, thus it is important to take two steps into consideration and one of these has already been taken. The reference to the death penalty in the Constitution of the Republika Srpska entity has been abolished and it eliminated the possibility of its use as a punishment, thus it has been aligned with international human rights standards. Another step is designating a national preventive mechanism against torture and ill-treatment, which will establish a framework to prevent such abuses from occurring in the first place. This can be achieved through measures such as monitoring detention centres and prisons, investigating allegations of torture and ill-treatment, and ensuring accountability for those responsible. By taking these steps, a society can work towards ensuring the fundamental human rights of all individuals are protected and respected.

The eleventh condition for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU candidacy emphasizes the need to foster an environment conducive to civil society, aligning with European standards on freedom of association and assembly. This involves safeguarding the rights to form associations and ensuring the independence of civil society organizations (CSOs). A key challenge, however, arises when members of political parties join CSOs, using these platforms to advance their political agendas. This practice can blur the lines between independent civil advocacy and political interests, diminishing the public's trust in CSOs. The overlap of political and civil roles

erodes the legitimacy of both the organizations and their activities, including protests presented as independent citizen movements. To maintain the integrity of civil society, it's crucial to establish clear boundaries and transparency, preventing political interests from co-opting CSOs. Addressing this intermingling is essential for preserving the effectiveness of civil society in representing diverse interests and fostering democratic processes.

The twelfth priority of the Union for Bosnia and Herzegovina, guaranteeing freedom of expression and media, and the protection of journalists, involves addressing complex challenges. Ensuring judicial follow-up to threats and violence against journalists is critical, as only a quarter of such cases in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been thoroughly investigated (European Federation of Journalists, 2023). The situation is exacerbated by restrictive laws in the entity of Republika Srpska, such as the re-criminalization of defamation and proposed "foreign agent" law, which create a stifling environment for independent journalism. Safety concerns and underreporting of incidents due to lack of trust in police and judicial institutions also pose significant challenges. Political and financial pressures, particularly for journalists working for government-funded media outlets, restrict the freedom of expression and diversity of reporting. The increasing attacks and hostile rhetoric against journalists, with a noted 137% increase in threats in 2022 compared to 2021, further underline the urgency of this issue. To address these challenges, it's crucial to enhance judicial processes, amend restrictive laws, build trust in law enforcement and judicial systems, safeguard against political and financial pressures, and condemn and address the culture of hostility and violence against journalists. The European Union and other international organizations call for an end to the repression and stifling of independent journalism in BH, urging authorities to create an environment where free and independent media can flourish (Media Freedom Coalition, 2023).

The thirteenth condition for joining the European Union focuses on the protection and inclusion of vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, children, LGBTI persons, members of the Roma community, detainees, migrants, asylum seekers, displaced persons, and refugees. This condition is crucial for ensuring equal access to rights and opportunities for all individuals. The Treaty on the European Union states that any European country may apply for membership if it respects democratic values and is committed to promoting them. The key criteria for accession, mainly defined at the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 (the 'Co-

penhagen criteria'), include stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities (European Commission, 2023). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, efforts have been made to improve the rights of national minorities. The Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with support from the European Union and the Council of Europe, established a mechanism to improve the application of standards defined by the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. This mechanism helps develop criteria and indicators on the rights of national minorities, essential for monitoring and improving the implementation of related recommendations (Council of Europe, 2023). However, persons with disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina face significant challenges, including institutionalization and abuse. The government's response to incidents of abuse in institutions has been criticized for not addressing the root cause: the practice of placing people with disabilities in institutions. As a state party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Bosnia and Herzegovina has an obligation to protect people with disabilities from violence and neglect and ensure their right to community living (Cerimović, 2023).

Public Administration Reform for EU Alignment

The European Union's ongoing efforts in public administration reform aim at enhancing the functionality and efficiency of public administrations across its member states. These efforts are crucial for addressing contemporary challenges and ensuring effective governance. One of the EU's primary initiatives in this regard is the "Public Administration Cooperation Exchange" (PACE), introduced by the European Commission. PACE focuses on promoting cooperation and cross-border exchanges among member states to build administrative capacity and prepare the next generation of policymakers. This initiative is particularly important given the shared challenges faced by national public administrations, such as climate change, digital transformation, and the effects of globalization. These complex, multidimensional problems necessitate cooperation at both the national and European levels. PACE involves targeted study visits, where civil servants from one EU member state are embedded in a peer administration from another member state for a period ranging from 5 days to 3 months. This facilitates the exchange of knowledge and best practices, particularly in areas such as digital and green transformation, public adminis-

tration performance improvement, and professionalization of public administration. The EU Commission's support for member states to improve their administrative capacity extends beyond PACE. It encompasses various approaches including the identification of critical issues, support in the design and deployment of reforms, capacity-building tools, peer-based guidance, and financial support. The Commission's efforts are driven by the need to adapt public administrations to significant challenges such as rapid technological change, demographic shifts, complex policy management, the importance of green transitions, and competition for limited public funds (European Commission, 2023).

Bosnia and Herzegovina, a candidate for EU membership, exemplifies the need for comprehensive public administration reform. The country is currently at an early stage of preparation to take on EU membership obligations and has shown limited progress in various areas such as public procurement, statistics, and public internal financial control. Crucial to these reform efforts is the importance of streamlining the governance system. Transitioning from the current setup of thirteen separate legislative, executive, and judicial governance bodies to a more integrated structure would significantly enable a quicker transformation of public administration. This transformation is vital to better serve citizens. For BiH to progress at an increased pace, it's imperative that its peoples become more politically engaged with a focus on streamlining governance, thus enabling the state to better regulate public administration. Major steps are required for BiH to align its legal framework with the EU *acquis*, especially in the internal market and other areas such as competitiveness, inclusive growth, and resources. To support BiH in its reform efforts, the EU, through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2021-2027 (IPA III), has provided significant financial support for programs focusing on justice, public administration reform, public finance management, EU integration, and environmental and climate change issues. This assistance is crucial for BiH to implement the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and the Green Agenda (Sarajevo Times, 2023). Furthermore, high-level political dialogues have been conducted between the EU and BiH, focusing on managed public finances, building a professional civil service, and harmonizing legislation on the civil service. The European Commission has welcomed BiH's adoption of the Strategy for Public Finance Management and has urged the country to focus on revising its existing Action Plan for public administration reform, establishing functional coordination structures, and har-

monizing civil service law with the principle of merit. The EU's approach to public administration reform is comprehensive and tailored to the unique needs of each member state. This approach is particularly pertinent for countries like BiH, where significant reforms are necessary to align with EU standards and practices. The success of these reforms is critical not only for the individual member states but also for the cohesive and effective functioning of the EU as a whole.

Transforming challenges into opportunities

In the wake of its complex and conflict-ridden history, Bosnia and Herzegovina stands at a pivotal point on its path toward European Union integration. The legacy of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Dayton Peace Accords, while ending overt conflict, left deep-seated divisions that continue to impede the country's political and societal progress. These divisions, further entrenched by mono-national political parties that emerged in the wake of Yugoslavia's disintegration, have perpetuated a political landscape marked by fragmentation and deadlock. This environment has slowed Bosnia and Herzegovina's integration into the EU, a process that demands not only meeting the EU's stipulated conditions but also internal transformation and reconciliation. As Bosnia and Herzegovina strives to meet the fourteen key conditions set forth by the European Union, it must look beyond these as mere formalities. These conditions present a framework for the country to overhaul its governance structures, strengthen democratic institutions, and reinforce the rule of law and human rights. However, this journey is not just about institutional reforms; it's about redefining the country's identity and role in the region. The rich cultural and historical tapestry of Bosnia and Herzegovina, shaped by diverse influences from the Western, Eastern, and Muslim Arab worlds, is a unique asset that can be harnessed through strategic decision-making and repositioning to promote a more inclusive, cohesive, and dynamic society. By leveraging these strengths, Bosnia and Herzegovina can transform its challenges into opportunities for regional growth and influence. The country's journey towards EU integration should thus be seen not only as a path to economic and political alignment with Europe but as a chance to forge a new, more constructive role in international affairs. To achieve this, Bosnia and Herzegovina must engage in a concerted effort to transcend its past divisions, building a society where diverse groups of people can coexist and thrive.

The political engagement of its citizens is vital in this process. This journey requires a pragmatic yet visionary approach, prioritizing the nation's unique interests and values, and ensuring a future that benefits its citizens and contributes positively to the European Union. Through this focused approach, Bosnia and Herzegovina can aspire to not just join the EU but to become a vital and dynamic member contributing to the richness and diversity of the Union.

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