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On the European path

After a decade-long wait, Bosnia and Herzegovina has received EU candidate status. But to become a member, there is still much work to be done

Obtaining a candidate status to join the European Union after decades of obstacles and uncertainty is undoubtedly an important achievement for both Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the EU. However, examining the steps ahead to a full EU membership would be incomplete without looking at the wider context, in particular the country's relationship with its neighbours.

If this part of Europe shows a willingness to use its comparative geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-cultural advantages wisely, then it could become a mediator that would truly connect Europe and Asia, Central Europe and the Mediterranean, and the Adriatic and the Black Sea areas. Taking on such a constructive role requires looking at the future as well as drawing lessons from the recent past. Among other things, this implies a new approach based on values such as human rights, the rule of law, mutual respect and tolerance.

Given the determination of the competent institutions, the high degree of political consensus, as well as the obvious support of public opinion regarding its EU integration, it is clear that Bosnia and Herzegovina has waited too long for its candidate status.

On the European path

The 2003 EU-Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki was very promising for the region, including for Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was then that the EU confirmed its unequivocal support for the European future of the Western Balkans countries with the European Council adopting the 'Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European integration'. It is interesting to note that Bosnia and Herzegovina, then possessing the status of a potential candidate, was side by side with the Republic of Croatia. However, due to numerous internal and external factors that blocked the reform process, Bosnia and

Herzegovina only signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2008 and officially applied for EU membership in 2016.

The main perpetrators of the current hurdles and blockades on Bosnia and Herzegovina's European and Euro-Atlantic path are domestic 'anti-Europeans'. They disregard a potential EU membership, aware that the upcoming civilisational processes will compel them to respect the rules and standards imposed by the EU legislative environment. They understand that they would then have to give a chance to some other forces on the political stage.

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In addition, it is important that the EU does not make new mistakes in regard to Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the last decade, lenient policies towards the destructive politicians who openly threatened the Dayton Peace Agreement and the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the hesitation and unwillingness to sanction radical politicians who threatened peace in the country and the region were amongst the biggest mistakes the EU has committed.

If the EU had acted more firmly in the last 10 years, Bosnia and Herzegovina would have been spared from many crises. Procrastination, hesitation and indecision only encouraged separatist and pro-Russian forces to openly undermine fundamental European values. The EU should never again behave weakly and indecisively towards our country. The path to transforming Bosnia and Herzegovina into a stable, peaceful and reliable state is highly connected with a stronger EU engagement.

It is precisely because of this standstill that special importance is given to the candidate country status, which has restored hope that Bosnia and Herzegovina will finally and irreversibly position itself on a European path that has been outlined two decades ago, despite constant hurdles.

Emerging benefits

Given the complete shift in geopolitical circumstances since 24 February 2022, the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina have little choice or time at their disposal. It is obvious that geopolitical and security aspects, as well as a clear change in Europe's security architecture, significantly influenced the attitudes of the EU regarding the intensification of the integration processes. The decision to grant the candidate country status is a step forward, but at the same time, it is a great responsibility and

challenge for Bosnia and Herzegovina and its institutions.

We should not lose sight of the fact that the candidate status has numerous benefits for the country as a result. Above all, any instance of external integration also represents progress on the internal political level – as well as an incentive to continue on the European path. This is a signal that Bosnia and Herzegovina has the political potential and can move forward towards a European future.

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Secondly, the consequences of this decision mean the country is moving legally and formally one step closer to EU membership. The EU candidate country status is a new platform, which provides additional opportunities, but also creates new challenges to be tackled together. Overcoming these challenges will rank Bosnia and Herzegovina in the family of developed European states.

In addition to the political benefits of the candidate country status, the state and its citizens will also have additional financial opportunities. Although obtaining new funds for the candidate country is not guaranteed, numerous benefits are activated; primarily the IPA (Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance) funds, but also other tools intended to support a wide range of reforms in the concerned candidate country. How much the European funds will be increased in practice will depend solely on the capabilities of Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutions: firstly, the ability to maximise the opportunities of the candidate country status and, secondly, the capacity to implement reforms as quickly as possible.

These two processes are directly connected: higher implementation of reforms leads to more efficient institutions, which automatically opens greater possibilities of using EU support, as well as direct foreign investments. This would create a more stable political and security environment which is more attractive for economic investments.

A serious obligation

The arguments above clearly indicate that the candidate country status is a significant event for Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, optimism is warranted only if it is accepted as a serious obligation. It is of crucial importance to know what awaits us and to clearly set priority tasks and deadlines. Fulfilling the priorities of the European Commission remains imperative. The reforms, which are requested in the aforementioned

document, are the first prerequisite for creating the conditions for starting accession negotiations. The next task is to determine a date to start the negotiations that will be a direct indicator of real progress towards membership and a concrete achievement for Bosnia and Herzegovina in terms of European integration. Bearing the above in mind, the biggest burden will be precisely on Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutions, which will act in accordance with European requirements on the one hand, but inevitably also under the influence of political parties, on the other. Therefore, it is important to note that fulfilling the stipulated obligations will necessitate rallying around state interests for EU integration, instead of narrow party interests. This would imply a significant change in the entire operating system, which must be much faster and more efficient in the future.

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A responsible approach to those obligations implies the adoption of reforms. Practically, it also requires the adoption and implementation of the necessary strategies. In this context, it is essential to remove political obstacles for a more efficient action to establish a single body which would deal with this process and be the 'one true voice' of Bosnia and Herzegovina on this path. There is an obvious need for the formation of new state ministries which would implement key EU policies such as agriculture, health, education and European integration.

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The accelerated progress of Bosnia and Herzegovina towards full EU membership does not only mean a stronger economic connection, but also the building of a new kind of solidarity based on common values and beliefs, which constitute the essence of the European identity. Bosnia and Herzegovina is at a crossroads, faced with the option of either being pushed into dangerous isolation or overcoming the disastrous ethnocratic pattern of the government and creating the conditions for stronger integration within the European community.

The EU is our destiny. Democracy and the standard of living of people in our country will largely depend on the speed and quality of this desire. It is time to learn our lessons, correct mistakes and move forward strongly. Onward to the EU! Onward to NATO!



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