

The EU is starting accession talks with Bosnia and Herzegovina

Paulina Wankiewicz-Kłoczko

On 21 March, the European Council decided to initiate accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), which is the last Western Balkan state (apart from Kosovo) to open such talks. Sarajevo has been seeking this for years, but its application for membership was only accepted in 2016. In 2019, the European Commission (EC) identified 14 key areas that needed to be reformed for BiH to start negotiations, including the functioning of democratic institutions, the rule of law, fundamental rights, human rights and administrative reform. In December 2022 BiH was granted candidate status, but the continuation of the process was made conditional upon progress in these areas and the fulfilment of nine specified conditions. On 12 March this year, the EC assessed the reforms and the pace of their implementation positively, and so it recommended accession negotiations to be opened.

Commentary

- The decision to grant candidate status to BiH is a strategic response to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and the EU's concerns about the stability of BiH and the entire Western Balkans region. It also came as a sign of the EU resuming an active enlargement policy, after years of stagnation, that can cover not only eastern neighbourhood countries but also those in the Western Balkans. The member states which particularly advocated for BiH's candidate status were those which see an active EU policy in the Balkans as a priority, namely Slovenia, Croatia, Austria and Italy. Until February 2022, both the EU and BiH had remained relatively passive regarding the country's potential accession. The government in Sarajevo believed that enhancing relations with the EU was quite unlikely, so reforms were not prioritised, while the EU did not react to the constantly deteriorating rule of law standards in the country.
- The BiH government took advantage of the opportunity created by the resumption of the enlargement policy and implemented the most urgent changes, including the adoption of laws on conflict of interest and anti-money laundering. The European Commission also adopted a flexible approach and limited its requirements to four specific demands: concluding an agreement with the EU agency Frontex and adopting laws on counteracting money laundering, combating the financing of terrorism, preventing conflicts of interest, and on reform of the courts. EU politicians (including the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen) also put pressure on the government elites in BiH during numerous visits preceding the March EC report. What also helped the government in Sarajevo step up reforms was the general change in the dynamics of the

EU's relations with its eastern neighbourhood. Since candidate status had been granted to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the Western Balkan countries had become increasingly concerned that the EU would focus on these three countries, and reduce its involvement in the Balkans as a consequence.

- The fact that the negotiations have been opened does not mean that BiH will join the EU in the near future, especially since it is the least prepared of all the candidates to do so. Nevertheless it has made significant progress, especially since the last parliamentary elections in November 2022, and European leaders wanted to reward the government in Sarajevo for this. Ukraine's accession process may provide an additional incentive for the BiH elites to implement the necessary reforms. However, given the complicated domestic situation in the country (see '[Bośnia i Hercegowina – gry separatyzmem Republiki Serbskiej](#)'), the government may still prove unable to maintain the current favourable dynamics. Furthermore, BiH's progress on the path towards EU accession will also depend on the engagement of the EU itself.