

March 2026

Länderbericht

Country Office Bosnia and Herzegovina



2026: Election year in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Stagnation, regression or breakthrough?

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On the 4th of October 2026 Bosnia's population will cast their votes and participate in not just one, but in multiple elections on different levels. On a nationwide level they will vote for the Presidency - consisting of three members-, the national and entity parliaments - of the Federation of Bosnian and Herzegovina (FBiH) and the Republika Srpska (RS)- as also the regional parliaments in the ten cantons of the FBiH and the president of the RS.

During the elections and the counting of votes it will be of major importance to ensure and prevent any election fraud - for which the country amongst observers is infamous for, using different mechanism to manipulate results. Not long ago the snap elections for the new president of the RS on the 23rd of November 2025 illustrated this, leading afterwards to new elections in four electoral districts: Bratunac, Laktaši, Doboje und Zvornik, that are considered to be strongholds of the nationalistic Alliance of the Independent Social democrats (SNSD). The citizens of these districts were called up to cast their ballots on the 8th of February 2026 again, after observers noticed in the first round inconsistencies in 60 polling stations that didn't add up with the publicly announced results. Those newly casted elections changed, however, little, with the SNSD-candidate Dr. Siniša Karan still winning with 50,5% the presidency. His opponent, Prof. Dr. Branko Blanuša from the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), fetching 48% of the votes.

The last two terms of the central government following the 2018 and 2022 elections were marked by ethnic tensions and ongoing political deadlocks that hindered the country's development. The peak of this tense legislation period was eventually reached in 2025, often referred to as the tensest state crisis since the 1992-1995 Bosnian-war. This crisis was brought up by the irresponsible and separatist agitation of the SNSD party and its coalition partners in the RS (DEMOS, DNS, SP, SPRS, US). Those partners helped the SNSD, that only has 34,6% of the seats in the People's Assembly of RS, to gain a 2/3 majority, enabling it to veto decisions on national level.

Managing the state crisis:

The mentioned state crisis started already on the 7th of July 2023. Back then the president of the RS, Milorad Dodik (SNSD), assed two laws, under which the decisions of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (HR), the former German Federal minister Christian Schmidt, would no longer apply for the RS. The Court of BiH sentenced him on the 26th of February 2025 to a one-year imprisonment and band him from any political activities for six years. As a result, Dodik threatened with the division of BiH, should the verdict stand. He gained support by the Russian president Vladimir Putin, Serbia and Hungary for his stand. Germany and Austria, on the other hand, imposed a ban on the 3rd of April 2025 to enter their territories. The EU and the USA aligned themselves

behind the territorial integrity of BiH, condemning Dodik's actions as unacceptable and demanded him to back down.

Enforcement of the verdict was not possible for the time being, as Dodik was being protected by RS police officers, which meant that a violent internal conflict was likely in the event of his arrest. However, Dodik did appeal the verdict, which shows that he accepts the court in principle. On August the first, 2025, the verdict was upheld by the Appeals Chamber of the Supreme Court. The execution of the prison sentence was avoided by Dodik by paying a fine. On the 6th of August 2025 the election commission of BiH confirmed the loss of office. Dodik's appeal against this decision was rejected on August 18th, 2025.

However, the stalemate continued until the 18th of October 2025. On that day Ana Trišić-Babić, a politician close to Dodik, was elected as interim president of the RS. This takeover signalled a two-decade reign of Milorad Dodik: from 1998 to 2001 and from 2006 until 2010 he was Prime minister of the RS, from 2010 until 2018 president of the RS, until 2022 the Serbian representative in the presidency of BiH and afterwards again president of the RS. To this day, however, Dodik clings to the chairmanship of the SNSD as a political power base and to his separatist rhetoric. In the end of all of this— despite his vast threats- he yielded to the national institutions of BiH and international pressure. The laws in RS that were challenged by the Constitutional Court of BiH have been withdrawn.

Party system and coalition governments

The dominating parties are:

1. The Democratic Action (SDA) is a Muslim-Bosniak dominated conservative party, that won 17,01% in 2018 and 17,2% in the national elections of 2022; the party leader is Bakir Izetbegović (69) since 2015;
2. The Serbian National Alliance of Independent Social democrats (SNSD) won with 16,03% and 16,3% the elections; since its foundation in 1996 the chairman is Milorad Dodik (67);
3. The Christian-Croatian party of Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH) won 9,05%/8,8% in the last elections; their leader is Dr. Dragan Čović (69) since 2005;
4. The multiethnic party Social democratic Party (SDP) won 9,08%/8,2% in 2018/2022; Nermin Nikšić (65) is since 2014 its chairman and serves as federal Prime Minister of the FBiH's government;
5. The conservative (once ultra nationalistic) Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) won 9,8% / 7,1%, their chairman since last year is the Professor of Electrical Engineering Dr. Branko Blanuša (55).

In addition, there are numerous small parties, some of which have split off from the leading parties. Among these, Trojka, consisting out of the parties of the social democratic party SDP (8,2% in 2022), the Bosniak-conservative party NiP (People and Justice, 5% 2022) and the liberal NS (Our Party, 3,1% 2022), plays an important role, as it is part of the coalition governments both at the national level and in the federation. In the House of Representatives of BiH, the Trojka is the strongest force with ten out of 42 seats, ahead of the Bosniak SDA with nine seats; followed by the Serbian SNSD with six and the Croatian HDZ BiH with four members of parliament.

It is noteworthy that two of the five leading parties—the Bosniak SDA and the Croatian HDZ BiH—are associate members of the European People's Party (EPP), meaning they belong to the Christian Democratic and center-right conservative family of parties at the European level, which forms the largest political group in the European Parliament. The Serbian Party of Democratic Progress (PDP, 4.6% in 2022) is also an associate member, as is the small Croatian HDZ 1990 (2.6% in 2022). The Serbian SDS is close to the EPP.

From December 2019 to January 2023, BiH was governed by a coalition comprising the Serbian SNSD, which provided the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, the Bosniak SDA, and the Croat HDZ BiH. Smaller partners included the Democratic Front (DF, 5.81% in 2018), a splinter group of the SDP; the Serbian conservative Democratic People's Alliance (DNS, 4.18% in 2018); and the Serbian Socialist Party (SP, 1.89% in 2018).

This government was replaced following the elections on October 2nd, 2022, by a coalition comprising the Croatian HDZ BiH—which now provided the prime minister, Borjana Krišto—the Serbian nationalist SNSD, and the social-conservative-liberal Trojka of the SDP, NiP, and NS. Other coalition partners include DEMOS, the Serbian Democratic Alliance (1.93% in 2022), a splinter group of the DNS, and the conservative Serbian United Srpska (US, 1.56% in 2022), a splinter group of the SDS. The coalition thus comprises seven parties.

The SDA, as the main representative of the Bosniaks, which held the office of Prime Minister from 2002 to 2007 and from 2015 to 2019, was thus excluded from the government for the first time in twenty years. The HDZ BiH, on the other hand, has been a continuous member of the government since late 2002. By the time the state crisis erupted in early 2025, however, the government has largely been paralysed. The position of Minister of Security has also remained vacant since then, after the incumbent, Nenad Nešić of the Serbian DNS—who served in the government on the SNSD ticket—was arrested for corruption in late 2024.

A new coalition with the Bosniak SDA as the largest faction is not possible, as the party refuses to join the government in light of the upcoming elections and its exclusion in 2022. Nevertheless, a governing majority without the Serbian SNSD in the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of parliament, might be possible under certain circumstances with the Serbian opposition parties PDP, SDS, ZPiR, as well as the DF or NES from the Federation. But in the House of Peoples, the SNSD, with three out of five deputies in the Serbian third of the chamber, still has the ability to block legislation, which it makes full use of. That is why the Croatian HDZ BiH is sticking with the largely ineffective coalition with the Serbian nationalist SNSD despite everything. Even the fulfillment of the HDZ BiH's core condition—an amendment to the electoral law intended to ensure that the Croatian member of the Presidency is elected by a majority of Croatian voters—is not compelling enough for the HDZ BiH to abandon the coalition. After all, this unmet condition is a key factor in keeping its voters united, which is important for the upcoming election campaign.

The conflict over the three-member presidency

The Presidency of BiH is a collective head of state. It consists of three members: a Bosniak, a Croat, and a Serb. The first two are elected directly in the FBiH, where, according to the latest census in 2013, Bosniaks accounted for about 70% and Croats for 22% of the population. The Serb representative is directly elected in the RS, where 81.5% of the population is Serb. A term in office is four years. Two consecutive terms are permitted. The presidency rotates every eight months. The main responsibilities of the presidency include representing the state, foreign policy, and defense: concluding international treaties, appointing ambassadors, commanding the armed forces, and preparing the national budget. Decisions are primarily made by consensus.

Many Croats, who make up about 15% of the population and are the smallest group of the three constituent peoples in BiH, feel, however, disadvantaged in the presidential election, because the Croatian representative can be elected with votes from Bosniaks even against the will of the Croatian majority. Although Croats make up only 22% of the population in the Federation, 41.5% of voters cast their ballots for the Croatian presidential candidate in 2018. Thus, Željko Komšić—a Social Democrat (SDP) until 2012, then a member of the Democratic Front (DF), whose voter base was primarily in constituencies with a Bosniak majority—managed to secure the “Croat seat” in the Presidency in 2006 and 2010, as well as in 2018 and

2022, against the candidates of the Croatian HDZ BiH, who were elected in constituencies with a Croat majority. The defeated HDZ BiH candidates were Ivo Miro Jović in 2006, Borjana Krišto in 2010 and 2022, and Dragan Čović in 2018; in 2002 and 2016, Čović prevailed as the candidate. Here, the HDZ BiH is insisting on a change to the electoral law requiring that the Croatian candidate secure a majority in the predominantly Croatian cantons.

From 2014 to 2018, the Presidency was composed of the leaders of three EPP partner parties—Bakir Izetbegović of the Bosniak SDA, who had been in office since 2010; Dr. Mladen Ivanić of the Serb PDP; and Dr. Dragan Čović of the Croat HDZ BiH—who worked together quite harmoniously. They were succeeded until 2022 by Šefik Džaferović of the SDA, Milorad Dodik of the Serbian SNSD, and Željko Komšić of the Democratic Front (DF) from the Federation. Since 2022, the main representatives of the Bosniaks (SDA) and the Croats (HDZ BiH) have no longer been represented in the Presidency. Instead, the Federation is represented by the two Social Democrats Dr. Denis Bećirović (SDP) and Željko Komšić (DF), as well as Željka Cvijanović from the Serbian nationalist SNSD. Thus, the Presidency, just like the government, was divided and blocked by the separatism of the SNSD.

The elections as opportunity for changes

The prevailing ethnic dominance, the fragmentation of the political landscape, and—in particular—the efforts of the RS to secede from the state are destabilizing the country and preventing the necessary reforms. Added to this is widespread corruption and nepotism: in Transparency International's latest Corruption Perceptions Index, BiH ranks 109th with 34 points, marking a decline of eight points over the past twelve years, when BiH ranked 72nd. In this regard, analysts in the country speak of a “captured state”: first aligned are the interests of the individual, then those of the party and one's own ethnic group, and finally those of the country—if at all.

How can a new beginning be possible under these circumstances? How can the numerous obstacles be overcome? Only if the order of priorities is reversed: first the country, then the party or ethnic group, and finally the individual—which requires a generational shift and a cultural transformation in politics. The government experiment that has been underway since 2023—involving the Trojka, the Croatian HDZ BiH, and Milorad Dodik's Serbian nationalist SNSD, which had adopted a more aggressive separatist course since the fall of 2021—has failed. It has contributed to plunging the country into a deep political crisis and setting it back. The Bosniak SDA is likely to benefit from this in the elections. Whether the opposition in the RS, which is often overlooked, will succeed in ending the SNSD's rule is uncertain, but entirely possible, as the recent close result of the early presidential election has shown.

The upcoming elections could create an opportunity, in which a new government would be able to introduce reforming priorities, bringing the country forward. The partner parties of the EPP would, as of now, together with the SDP or Trojka, be able to form a majority coalition. Even without the Croatian led HDZ BiH a government could be formed together with Trojka. If this is wise decision, leaving the major representative of the Croatian community, as done with the SDA, is, however, a different question. To ensure the ability to take political action, it would be advisable to exclude those who have been paralysing the country for years. If this isn't achieved, BiH will continue to fall out and remain mired in stagnation or regression. In terms of European policy, the past two years provide a clear example of this, as demonstrated by the handling of the EU Growth Plan and the possibility of EU accession negotiations.

BiH and the EU-Growth Plan for the West Balkan

The Growth plan was passed by the EU-Commission on the 8th of November 2023. Its main goal is to prepare and support the socioeconomic convergence of the six western Balkan countries towards an EU membership. The plan is based on four pillars:

1. Promoting economic integration into the EU internal market;
2. Promoting economic integration within the Western Balkans region;
3. Accelerating fundamental reforms;
4. Providing additional financial resources beyond the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) to implement the reforms.

A total of 6 billion euros is earmarked for 2024 through 2027, consisting of 2 billion in grants and 4 billion in concessional loans, with disbursement contingent upon the implementation of specific reforms in accordance with the agreed country-specific reform plans. For BiH, the original amount was 1.085 billion euros. That is nearly one and a half times the country's current national budget of 765 million euros.

Work on a reform agenda by representatives of the various levels of government in BiH—the state as a whole, the two entities, and the ten cantons of the Federation—did not begin until January 2024, but was soon blocked by representatives of the RS. The parliaments and the public were not involved. By the deadline of April 30th, 2024, only an uncoordinated list of reforms could be presented, which prompted numerous inquiries from the Commission. Although a revised agenda was submitted in September 2024, the Commission rejected it as incomplete. The RS and four Federation cantons governed by the Bosniak SDA (Tuzla, Zenica-Doboj, Central Bosnia, Una-Sana) prevented an agreement on the 113 reform measures required by the European Commission. The main points of contention were the role of state-level decisions and institutions such as the Constitutional Court, as well as the entities' veto rights. The new deadline, December 4th, 2024, also passed. As a result, BiH lost the first tranche of just over 70 million euros intended to pre-finance the reform agenda. Another approximately 38 million euros were lost after the next deadline in March 2025, totaling 10% of the planned amount, or 108.5 million euros.

Due to the political crisis triggered by the RS and its president in early 2025, it ultimately took until the deadline set by the European Commission—September 30th, 2025—for a reform agenda acceptable to the EU to be submitted following a decision by the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Serbian nationalist SNSD had lifted by than its veto. The path to better roads, cheaper energy, faster internet, fee-free money transfers, easier roaming, and other benefits is now clear, said Slovenian EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos. However, since the implementation of the 113 reform measures has largely failed to materialize, there is now a risk of losing the next instalment, the payment of which is tied to the implementation of the agreed-upon reforms.

Lost years on the pathway to EU-membership

At their summit in Brussels on the 21st of March 2024—two years ago—EU heads of state and government agreed to the conditional opening of accession negotiations with BiH. Overall, the process of rapprochement has already lasted a good quarter of a century. The EU has regarded BiH as a “potential candidate for accession” since 2000. As a first step, the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and BiH was signed in 2008 after three years of negotiations. However, it did not enter into force until June 1st, 2015, following the completion of all ratifications. BiH then submitted its application for EU membership on February 15th, 2016. However, a candidate status was not granted until December 2022.

Once negotiations begin, the accession process involves aligning with EU law across more than 30 chapters. In BiH, the constitution and the electoral law must be amended to end discrimination in accordance with the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. The institution of the HR of the international community, which has overseen the implementation of the civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement since late 1995 and is endowed with far-reaching powers, must be dissolved upon completion of the 5+2 program as part of the

accession process. Once all of the chapters have been completed, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and all member states must approve the accession treaty. By way of comparison: The accession process for Central and Eastern European countries to the EU after 1990 took a total of “only” ten to 14 years. It culminated in the major EU eastward expansion on May 1st, 2004. The last country to join the EU was Croatia in 2013, which demonstrated how successfully the process can proceed. The example of neighbouring Serbia illustrates how long accession negotiations can take: Serbia has been conducting negotiations since early 2014 and, while it has opened 22 of the 34 chapters, it has concluded only two.

According to the Eurobarometer survey from fall 2025, trust in the EU in BiH is relatively high, at 56% versus 39%. Only 28% trust their own government, and only 26% trust their own parliament. For 54% of respondents in BiH, the EU has a positive image, while only 17% view it negatively. In the member states, the EU has a positive image among only 42%. In BiH, 52% consider a EU membership a good thing, while only 25% view it as bad. In BiH, 66% believe the country would benefit from membership, while 31% hold the opposite view. However, so far only 38% feel connected to the EU, while 61% do not. According to a June 2024 survey by the Directorate for European Integration of BiH, as many as 71.2% would vote in favour of EU accession: 83.8% in the FBiH and 48.3% in the RS. The predominantly Bosniak and Croat citizens in the Federation are thus overwhelmingly positive toward the EU, while just under half of the more than 80% of Serb citizens in the RS share this view.

In order to open accession negotiations—which were scheduled between the EU and BiH as a conference in the spring of 2025—three laws had to be adopted as a precondition:

1. on the border regime; 2. on data protection; 3. on the judiciary and the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council. In addition, a chief negotiator (not three) and a coordinator for the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)—part of the EU’s financial support for candidate countries—had to be appointed. The laws on border control and the protection of personal data were passed; the other conditions were not. Another two years were lost, and in the third year as well, there will likely be no progress given the upcoming elections and the formation of a government.

This is a significant disadvantage for the country and its future prospects: the door to EU accession negotiations is open, and financial and administrative assistance is available, yet the presidency and the government are unable to capitalize on these opportunities and take the necessary steps.

The need for action is highlighted, among other things, by the Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2024, which analyses transformation processes related to democracy and market economies worldwide. Among the six Western Balkan countries, BiH ranks last in political transformation as a “deeply flawed democracy” and in government performance, which is rated as “weak.” With “limited” economic transformation, BiH ranks second-to-last in this area, ahead of Kosovo. A comparison with the two EU member states, Slovenia and Croatia—which are classified as “consolidating democracies” with “good governance”, and economically as “well-advanced” states—shows what future BiH could archive, if a joint political will to implement necessary reforms would be executed.

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