

As Bosnia Votes, Western Consensus Is Broken: What Germany and the EU Need to Do

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Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) will hold general elections on October 4 amid a prolonged institutional crisis and without an international envoy. The current diplomatic impasse between its European and American partners has broken Western consensus, undermining the enforcement of the country's postwar constitutional order. In the crucial post-election period, both Brussels and Berlin must prepare to play a bigger role in the future of BiH – a country that remains a key node of regional stability and European security.

More than three months after Christian Schmidt announced his sudden resignation from the post of High Representative, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) still has no new peace envoy. In this political limbo, the country will hold general elections on October 4 to select its three-member presidency and state, entity, and cantonal legislatures, as well as the president of Republika Srpska, one of its two entities.

The vote comes amid continuing domestic tensions over the country's constitutional order as defined in the 1995 [Dayton Peace Agreement](#) and while the Western consensus behind its enforcement is eroding. The main driver of this erosion is the sudden change of approach of the United States to Bosnia under the second administration of President Donald Trump, which is reflected in the policy it announced in May 2026 [to promote regional stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans](#). Since October 2025, when the shift

driven by Trump began to take effect, US diplomacy has aggressively promoted new business schemes in Bosnia that benefit individuals close to his family even at the cost of weakening international institutions. The [unexpected diplomatic pressure from the United States](#) to force Christian Schmidt's resignation – instead of Schmidt departing after the October elections as planned – leaves the country vulnerable to local rivalries and disagreements. In the aftermath of these sensitive national elections, BiH will be further destabilized by weak, disjointed international oversight that is less capable of fixing domestic disputes.

In hindsight, US diplomacy showed its hand this spring when it handpicked retired Italian diplomat Antonio Zannardi Landi to be nominated as High Representative. While Italy's former ambassador to Russia and Serbia has no direct diplomatic experience or knowledge of Bosnia, he does have significant business contacts there. In May, to portray

Zannardi Landi as a European successor to Christian Schmidt, Washington pushed Rome to formally endorse him as an "Italian candidate." When Germany, France, most other EU member states, and the United Kingdom refused to play along, the result was diplomatic deadlock. To save the situation, Europeans agreed to formally appoint Deputy High Representative Louis Crishock, a career US diplomat, as the Acting High Representative at an extraordinary session of the [Peace Implementation Council \(PIC\)](#) on June 30. So far, no permanent solution has been found. This interim one, which suits Trump's policy, sets a new paradigm for the country.

Three big questions will test the international approach to Bosnia:

- How should the EU address the shift of US policy in Bosnia? Can Europeans unite and develop a more nuanced approach, switching among cooperating with Americans where possible,

doing things without them where necessary, and standing up to them where appropriate – something neither Berlin nor Brussels is used to doing?

- To what extent can the Dayton framework retain its enforcement function as domestic obstruction increases and Western consensus has effectively broken down?
- With the Dayton framework under pressure, what spillover effects would a deeper crisis in BiH create for the neighboring countries of Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro?

US-EUROPE TENSIONS OVER BOSNIA THREATEN REGIONAL STABILITY

The Dayton Peace Agreement is the key piece of international architecture that has held BiH together since the end of the Yugoslav Wars in 1995. Its framework with its international institutions has always been managed in close cooperation between Americans and Europeans. The Office of the High Representative (OHR) was not only an institutional deterrent to destabilization but also a tool to mediate and resolve local disagreements.

As BiH heads toward general elections on October 4, serious domestic challenges to the Dayton constitutional framework are piling up while the Western consensus behind it has eroded. Against this backdrop, the post-election period is again likely to be marked by crisis stemming from the protracted formation of a government that throws the country into political limbo. This time, it will unfold amid uncertainty over the High Representative's role and mandate – including the use of the [Bonn Powers](#), a tool to enforce laws or remove officials. A new crisis could potentially further aggravate transatlantic tensions over how to resolve government formation, thus presenting a challenge for European security.

CONSEQUENCES OF US TRANSACTIONALISM

Previously, US policy on the Western Balkans had focused on institution building and postwar reconciliation. The concluding section of the Trump administration's policy for the Western Balkans from May 2026 states that, from now on, US actions in the region will be guided by the need to pursue "[direct return](#)" for American companies and investment. Milorad Dodik, a Bosnian Serb leader who previously served as president of Republika Srpska, had been under sanctions by the US government since early January 2022 – during the administration of US President Joe Biden – for [obstruction of the Dayton Peace Agreement and corruption](#). In 2025, Dodik managed to turn the tide through lobbying and networking in circles close to the Trump family. By positioning himself as a partner for future commercial deals in BiH, he succeeded in having the Trump administration [remove personal sanctions from him and his allies](#).

In Bosnia, one of the side effects of business activity was that the US government is no longer focusing on providing conflict mediation and diplomatic support to the integration process led by the EU. Instead, it concentrates on enabling US investment projects, such as [building the Southern Interconnection Gas Pipeline](#), and preventing domestic disputes from jeopardizing US investment. This project already ran into controversy earlier this year when the Bosnian parliament passed a law that enshrined [AAFS Infrastructure & Energy](#), a small firm recently established and run by close associates of President Trump's family, as the main operator of the future pipeline.

Such developments could embolden other private American business interests connected to the White House to pursue more projects in IT infrastructure and data centers, as well as the arms industry, that would undermine the EU's normative standards and processes.

Unilateral US diplomacy will also undermine BiH's EU accession path, which requires functional institutions at the state level. To formally start accession negotiations, Bosnia still needs to adopt reforms to strengthen the judiciary at the state level and appoint a chief negotiator for EU accession. This will require sustained diplomatic pressure from European capitals because it de facto means strengthening institutions at the expense of ethno-political leaders and the patronage networks that surround them. Since last year, the lack of US diplomatic support has already made driving such change more difficult. It will become even harder if American transactionalism emboldens local leaders and their patronage networks.

ELECTION OUTLOOK AND RISKS

The October 4 elections will be held under a substantially improved legal and technical framework, limiting opportunities for electoral fraud. Thanks to the intervention of previous High Representative Christian Schmidt, Bosnian voters will be able to identify themselves electronically and ballots will be counted more transparently than ever before. For example, polling stations will use ballot scanners and biometric voter identification.

Such improvements to election integrity will jeopardize the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), Milorad Dodik's party, which has spent almost two decades in power on the entity level in Republika Srpska (RS). Now, the opposition parties, which have agreed to form a coalition, have a realistic chance to take power there. However, the participation on September 7 of the entire political establishment of RS in the [funeral of deceased war criminal Ratko Mladic](#) signals the continuation of ethno-national mobilization across all parties in RS. Still, the electoral outcome in this entity will be the key determining factor for Bosnia's EU trajectory.

If the RS opposition gains enough seats in the House of Representatives at the federal level, a state-level coalition government between Bosnian pro-European parties and Dragan Covic's Croatian Democratic Union of BiH (HDZ) may be more conducive to unlocking the EU path. On the other hand, if Dodik's SNSD remains in power, his party – in opposition to EU integration efforts – would try to form a state-level government with the HDZ. If Dodik succeeds, the two parties would join efforts to further hollow out state institutions and lobby Washington for support for ethno-territorial engineering, including a constitutional reform for designing a political unit exclusively for ethnic Croats, the so-called third entity. This would be opposed by all relevant parties on the Bosniak side. Among the Bosniaks, Bakir Izetbegovic's ethno-national Party of Democratic Action, banking on protracted internal crisis, may win enough seats to form a government.

Notably, Serbia will hold snap elections on October 25 when the embattled populist government of President Aleksandar Vučić will face a united opposition after prolonged student protests. Mass protests and crackdown could result. While developments in Belgrade could trigger a new regional crisis, another scenario could be much worse: mutually reinforcing spillovers this winter that provide Russia with a low-cost option to manipulate European resources and draw them and political attention away from Ukraine.

OUTLOOK AND RECOMMENDATIONS

No matter who prevails in the general elections, the member states and institutions of the EU will need to engage with the new authorities in BiH in a way that restores what is often referred to as “integration momentum” – particularly if the country's commitment to reforms remains significantly limited and it again fails to absorb funds from the [EU Growth Plan](#) facility.

Currently, there are two main problems on the EU side. First, there is a lack of political attention to BiH among member states and within the Commission. Second, there is no sense of urgency for preparing for a post-election period. Germany should drive a fast-track initiative in Brussels at the level of the EU's [Political and Security Committee](#). Perhaps it should even drive ad hoc brainstorming among key EU capitals to develop a new diplomatic approach to BiH after October 4.

With the OHR's role increasingly weakened, Germany should proactively work on strengthening unanimity in the EU toward BiH, making use of the chance offered by the end of Viktor Orban's government in Hungary. As a plan B, it could help the EU consider targeted sanctions against all political actors who obstruct the functioning of state institutions or contribute to the destabilization of Bosnia.

Given that previous coordinating mechanisms – including the Quint and PIC – no longer work, government representatives from key EU capitals must prepare to manage the risk of a downward spiral in Bosnia that could further destabilize a country that is already in deep crisis. No one should forget that BiH remains a key node of regional stability and European security and that its Dayton framework has been one of the central pillars of the post-Yugoslav order in the Western Balkans. Given the broader geostrategic and regional implications of this situation, Berlin should closely follow the political developments in BiH in the aftermath of the October 4 elections. It should lead an EU approach to offering strategic communication at the highest level to provide political support and legitimacy to the election results after they are announced. Further, Berlin should clearly signal that no political or security vacuum shall be tolerated and urge for a timely formation of government.

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