



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA'S EU INTEGRATION IN THE SHADOW OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR: THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY?

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ABSTRACT

The geopolitical upheaval triggered by the Russia-Ukraine War has induced significant shifts in the European security architecture and enlargement policy, with profound implications for the Western Balkans. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), a country still grappling with internal divisions and institutional fragility three decades after the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), has emerged as a critical focal point within this readjusted geopolitical context. The European Union's (EU) enlargement policy, which has stalled due to both BiH's internal problems and the challenges the EU has encountered, has begun a new phase in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine War. BiH was swiftly recognized as a candidate for EU membership in the wake of the war and received the green light to start accession negotiations. This study examines whether the Russia-Ukraine War poses a threat or an opportunity for BiH's European future—on the one hand, disrupting BiH's internal balance by encouraging the separatist rhetoric of Republika Srpska (RS) leader Milorad Dodik, while on the other hand paving the way for faster integration into the European Union. The study argues that the answer depends on whether the EU adopts a renewed enlargement strategy that simultaneously addresses security concerns and democratic reforms, while placing particular emphasis on Serbia.

Key words: Bosnia and Herzegovina, European Union, Russia-Ukraine War, Republika Srpska, Enlargement.

RUSYA-UKRAYNA SAVAŞI'NIN GÖLGESİNDE BOSNA-HERSEK'İN AB ENTEGRASYONU: TEHDİT Mİ, FIRSAT MI?

ÖZ

Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı gerek Avrupa güvenlik mimarisinde gerekse Avrupa Birliği'nin (AB) genişleme politikasında önemli değişimlere neden olmuş, Batı Balkanlar üzerinde de derin etkiler yaratmıştır. Dayton Barış Anlaşması'nın (DBA) üzerinden yaklaşık otuz yıl geçmesine rağmen hâlâ iç bölünmeler ve kurumsal kırılganlıkla mücadele eden Bosna-Hersek (BiH), yeniden şekillenen Avrupa jeopolitiğinde önemli bir odak noktası hâline gelmiştir. Bosna-Hersek'in iç sorunları ve AB'nin karşı karşıya kaldığı sınamalardan kaynaklanan genişleme politikasındaki durgunluk, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı'yla birlikte yerini canlanmaya bırakmıştır. Bu süreçte Bosna-Hersek hızla AB aday ülke statüsü kazanmış ve üyelik müzakerelerine başlaması için onay almıştır. Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı, bir yandan ülkedeki iki entiteden biri olan Sırp Cumhuriyeti lideri Milorad Dodik'in ayrılıkçı söylemlerini güçlendirirken diğer yandan ülkenin AB entegrasyon sürecini hızlandırarak iki yönlü bir etki yaratmıştır. Bu çerçevede çalışma, savaşın Bosna-Hersek'in Avrupa perspektifi açısından bir tehdit mi yoksa bir fırsat olarak mı nitelendirilmesi gerektiğini irdelemektedir. Çalışma, bu sorunun yanıtının ancak AB'nin güvenlik kaygılarını ve demokratik reformları eş zamanlı olarak ele alan ve Sırbistan'a özel bir önem atfeden yenilenmiş bir genişleme stratejisini uygulamasına bağlı olduğunu ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Bosna-Hersek, Avrupa Birliği, Rusya- Ukrayna Savaşı, Sırp Cumhuriyeti, Genişleme.

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Introduction

As the Soviet Union was collapsing, Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević pursued military intervention against the republics that had declared independence, leading to devastating wars in Yugoslavia. While the wars in Slovenia and Croatia ended relatively quickly, Bosnian war started in 1992 lasted more than 3 years and cost the lives of over 100,000 people (Lampe, 2024). The war ended with the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), facilitated by U.S. diplomacy. At that time, the European Union (EU) was undergoing an internal transformation, seeking to complete its single market while also repositioning itself in the new world order. The famous words of the then Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jacques Poos clearly reflected the EU's initial enthusiasm in the early post-cold war era: "This is the hour of Europe, not the hour of the Americans" (Ganesh, 2022). Unfortunately, several factors, such as the EU's ineffective diplomatic initiatives in the Balkan conflicts, its reliance on the US and NATO for military intervention and the lack of consensus and coordination among the EU members, made this period a major disappointment for the Union (Tezcan, 2021, p. 52-53).

However, the EU tried to find solutions to the crises it experienced, echoing the famous statement of Jean Monnet, a leading figure in the EU: "Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises" (Barroso, 2011). The EU not only improved its political and military strength through the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) but also continued to use soft power instruments. It enhanced engagement in the Western Balkans, aspiring to become a conflict prevention and management actor, while also preparing these countries for EU membership under the Copenhagen criteria (Babuna, 2014, p.2). In the 1990s, the EU launched many initiatives in the Western Balkans, aiming to boost regional cooperation and enhance the Union's engagement with the regional countries.

The DPA created a complex institutional system in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the relations among ethnic groups have remained fragile. This situation makes BiH a country of critical importance for European security (Babuna, 2014, p.3). BiH functions as a unified state with two autonomous units referred to as entities: The Federation of BiH (predominantly inhabited by Bosniaks and Croats and composed of ten cantons) and the Republika Srpska (RS, mainly inhabited by Serbs). It also includes a separate administrative unit, the Brčko District. The DPA also created the Office of the High Representative (OHR). The High Representative is vested with comprehensive powers, commonly known as the "Bonn Powers", and is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the civilian dimensions of the peace accords. He may dismiss public officials and impose laws to ensure compliance with the agreement (Fella, 2024; Halilovic, 2024, p. 144).

Unfortunately, BiH remains fragile thirty years after the war and still has a long way to go in the EU integration process. This situation has become more apparent since Crimea's annexation by Russia in 2014 and especially after the Russia-Ukraine War erupted in February 2022. Since then, a sense of insecurity has returned, fuelled by fears that Serbia (Russia's closest ally in the Balkans) could embolden separatist movements within the Serb leadership in Bosnia, which enjoys Russian support. This has alerted peace advocates both domestically and internationally (Brezar, 2022). Nevertheless, the EU enlargement process, which had been stagnating for years because of internal and global challenges, experienced a sudden boom following the start of the Russia-Ukraine War.

Following the invasion, Kyiv, Chisinau and Tbilisi swiftly submitted their applications for EU membership, prompting an exceptionally rapid response from the Union. Ukraine and Moldova gained EU candidate status in June 2022, while Georgia was offered a formal

“membership perspective”. During the same period, the EU approved the launch of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia; and BiH was granted candidate status (Karjalainen, 2023, p.638). Subsequently, on 12 March 2024, the EU decided to launch accession talks with BiH (Wankiewicz, 2024). In its 2023 Enlargement Package, the European Commission advised initiating accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova, and awarding candidate status to Georgia, depending upon its fulfilment of specific conditions (European Union Neighbours East, 2025). Furthermore, the EU has reiterated its commitment to supporting Montenegro and Albania in advancing toward full membership in the coming years (Rasquinho, 2025).

At this point, the study aims to analyse whether the Russia-Ukraine War represents a looming threat or a chance for BiH, particularly in relation to its EU integration prospects. The study contends that the answer depends on the EU's ability to pursue a refreshed enlargement policy that tackles both security issues and democratic reforms, with a specific focus on Serbia. This research is divided into three primary parts. The first section examines the development of EU–BiH relations from the 1990s to the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022. The second section explores how the Russia-Ukraine War has influenced BiH's EU accession process. The third section compares BiH's EU integration process before and after the war, assessing whether the war generated momentum or created additional obstacles for EU-BiH relations, and concludes with a prospective outlook.

The EU-BiH Relations Before the Russia-Ukraine War: A Snapshot of the Past 30 Years

Understanding the evolution of EU–BiH relations over the past three decades requires a close examination of the broader regional dynamics. The Western Balkans' post-Russia-Ukraine war context, combined with the Union's evolving foreign policy, fostered deeper engagement between the EU and BiH.

The DPA formally established BiH as a sovereign state in 1995. Signed by Serbia and Montenegro (then FRY), Croatia, and BiH, the agreement ended a war that killed 100,000 people and displaced two million. While it secured peace, the agreement created a complex political structure, “one state, two entities, three constituent peoples”, which operates through ethnic quotas and a fragile institutional balance of power designed to preserve interethnic stability (Kučukalić, 2022, p. 106-107). The Union's growing engagement in the Western Balkans in the post-Dayton era reflected its ambition to become a credible peace actor and anchor of stability in the region. Having failed to prevent the war, the EU sought to redeem its role by promoting reconstruction, democratization, and regional cooperation through a series of strategic frameworks in Bosnia and the wider region (Özgöker et al., 2017, p. 32-33).

After the signing of the DPA, the EU introduced the “Regional Approach” in 1996 to promote stability in the Western Balkans. This approach stressed the importance of regional stability for the security of the Union and offered the Western Balkans a membership perspective. It focused on political and economic goals, including the rule of law, democracy and economic reconstruction (İnaç et. al., 2013, p.67-68). A year later, in 1997, the EU adopted a second instrument introducing country-specific conditionality in the areas of financial aid, trade, and bilateral relations. The conditions were about the application of the DPA, the return of refugees, cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), adherence to human rights, democratic elections, and good neighbourly relations. In cases of non-compliance, financial support and trade benefits would be suspended (İnaç et. al., 2013, p.68). Building upon these earlier frameworks, the start of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) in 2000

can be accepted as a milestone concerning the Union's involvement in the Western Balkans. The SAP was designed to foster regional stability and proposed a clear membership perspective to prospective EU candidates. In addition to promoting harmonization with the EU *acquis*, the SAP placed special emphasis on regional cooperation in sectors such as infrastructure improvement, free trade, and political dialogue. Although the process set common political and economic goals, it operated with a merit-based approach that evaluated each country's progress individually (European Union). However, unresolved issues such as the non-return of refugees and failure to arrest war criminals, resulted in the adoption of a fourth instrument, the "Strengthened Approach", which introduced further measures including compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria, improved economic ties, increased financial aid, support for civil society and institutions, partnership in judicial and internal affairs, and enhanced political dialogue (İnaç et al., 2013, p. 68).

The EU implemented concrete policy tools to actuate this political vision. Under the SAP, instruments such as the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), financial and trade support, and judicial and home affairs cooperation were introduced (İnaç et al., 2013, p.68). Among these instruments, the SAA played a central role as the formal starting point of the accession process.

In addition to these initiatives, the EU further reinforced the Western Balkan states' accession process through a series of summits and policy instruments. At the Feira European Council in June 2000, all SAP countries, including BiH, were recognized as potential EU candidates. This commitment was reiterated by the Zagreb Summit and later reaffirmed at the Thessaloniki Summit (2003), which declared that "the future of this region is in the European Union." These developments reaffirmed BiH's European perspective and underscored the EU's commitment to the Europeanization of the Western Balkans (Akdemir, 2018, pp. 4-5).

The impact of these instruments became visible in the case of BiH. The initial European Partnership for BiH was launched in 2004 and EU- BiH relations gradually intensified. In September 2007, readmission agreements and visa facilitation came into effect. In 2008, an Interim Trade Agreement entered into force, temporarily regulating trade relations until the SAA came into full force (Akdemir, 2018, p. 5). The SAA talks began in Sarajevo on 25 November 2005. The agreement was officially signed on 16 June 2008, marking a key advancement in BiH's integration into the EU (The Office for European Integration of the Government of West Herzegovina Canton). The SAA created a structured framework for the implementation of economic, legal and administrative reforms and became a driving force for democratization in the Western Balkans (Akdemir, 2018, p.5).

The EU supported the institutional framework established by the SAA with financial instruments. On 31 July 2008, the EU signed a financial agreement with BiH under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), which facilitated the establishment of a free trade area and reinforced the EU's position as Bosnia's main trading partner. Under the SAP, BiH also benefited from autonomous trade preferences. BiH gained visa-free access to the Schengen zone as of May 2010. However, ongoing political instability remained a concern. In the same year, the EEAS (European External Action Service) referred to BiH as "the most unstable corner of Europe," underscoring persistent governance challenges (Akdemir, 2018, p.5).

BiH, with one of the world's most complex constitutional systems, has faced persistent deadlocks in its EU integration process. The ethnic quota and veto mechanisms created by the DPA weaken state institutions, while the non-implementation of European

Court of Human Rights rulings, notably the Sejdić–Finci judgment, has stalled progress on fundamental rights and equality. In addition, the reluctance of political elites, especially the secessionist and pro-Russian stance of RS, has further entrenched the stagnation of reforms (Halilovic, 2024, pp. 144-166). In response to these stagnating reforms, the EU launched renewed efforts to re-engage BiH in the accession process. In June 2012, BiH and the EU initiated The High-Level Dialogue on the Accession Process to accelerate reforms which ultimately enabled the ratification and subsequent entry into force of the SAA on June 1, 2015. This milestone marked the transition from provisional trade relations under the Interim Agreement to a comprehensive institutional and legal framework for the cooperation between the EU and BiH (European Commissiona).

BiH officially submitted its application for European Union membership in February 2016. In response, the European Commission outlined 14 key priorities in the Opinion in May 2019, which had to be addressed before the start of the accession talks. These priorities, outlined by the EU Council in December 2019, constituted an extensive reform programme focusing on key areas such as democratic governance, the rule of law, basic rights, and public administration (European Commissiona). In parallel with these country-specific requirements for BiH, the EU also advanced a broader strategic vision for the entire Western Balkans.

The European Commission adopted the strategy titled *"A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans"* on 6 February 2018 to reinforce the Union's strategic engagement in the region. The enlargement strategy framed the European perspectives of the Western Balkans as a *"geostrategic investment in a stable, strong, and united Europe"*, and stressed the need for fundamental reforms as well as friendly ties with neighbouring states. It identified six flagship initiatives to encourage transformation in areas such as the security, rule of law, migration, energy, and digital connectivity. The strategy also stressed that the EU must be ready to embrace new members once they meet the accession criteria. In the strategy it was emphasized that if BiH maintained consistent effort and commitment, it could attain candidate status for accession. The European Commission submitted additional questions to BiH as part of the process of drafting its opinion on the country's EU accession application. These questions accounted for about 20% of the original Questionnaire submitted in December 2016 (European Commission, 2018).

Beyond this strategic and political framework, the EU has also backed BiH's European path with substantial financial assistance. The EU has provided sustained financial support to BiH beyond political engagement. Between 1995 and 2008, BiH received approximately €2.8 billion in EU assistance, primarily through the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation (CARDS) and the IPA. For the 2007–2013 period, €615 million was allocated under IPA, and €552.1 million followed during the 2014–2020 IPA II cycle. These funds supported political reforms, rule of law, civil society, and economic development (Akdemir, 2018, pp. 6-7; European Commissionb).

That is to say, the EU has actually maintained a robust presence in BiH since 1996, initially through the Delegation of the European Commission. In the aftermath of the Lisbon Treaty's entry into force in 2009, this representation evolved into the Delegation of the European Union to BiH with the EU Special Representative, which operated under the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. This Delegation has subsequently coordinated EU integration strategies and funding mechanisms. Since 2010, these functions have also been conducted in cooperation with the OHR, particularly regarding political oversight and post-Dayton institutional reforms (Kučukalić, 2022, p.108).

The EU launched the European Police Mission (EUPM) in 2003 with the aim of transforming BiH's police force into professional, multi-ethnic, and autonomous forces in accordance with international standards. This mission was a prerequisite for the signing of the SAA. Even though the adoption of a police reform law on April 11, 2008 introduced a normative framework to safeguard the independence of police structures; democratic oversight and protection from political interference remain incomplete, especially given the challenges of terrorism, organized crime, and corruption (Kučukalić, 2022, p.108). Therefore, the EU's approach to Bosnia and Herzegovina has encompassed not only civil reforms but also the maintenance of security and stability through military missions.

Alongside these civilian efforts, the EU has also ensured a significant security presence in BiH through its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) instruments. Johann Sattler, the EU Special Representative (EUSR), also serves as the Head of the EU Delegation. Since 2004, the EUFOR ALTHEA military mission has operated in the country under a UN Security Council mandate, supporting Bosnian authorities in securing a safe and stable environment (European Commission). As the successor to the NATO-led SFOR mission, ALTHEA represents the European Union's third and most comprehensive military operation to date (European External Action Service).

Despite this strong institutional and military presence, particularly following the February 2014 protests, the EU's ability to ensure lasting political and social stability in BiH has increasingly been called into question. The protests, which reflected widespread public dissatisfaction with the economic and political conditions at the time, were described by some analysts as the "Bosnian Spring" (Judah, 2014). In this context, an examination of Russia's past involvement in the Western Balkans and its destabilizing influence in the region is particularly relevant. Although Russia has long been present in the Balkans, since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 it has intensified its engagement in the region through an assertive foreign policy that uses a mix of tactics, including disinformation, support for far-right and authoritarian actors, and exploitation of political, economic, and religious ties. Moscow also plays the energy card and exploits media channels such as Sputnik to propagate pro-Russian and anti-Western rhetoric. As argued, Russia's actions aim to destabilize the Western Balkans and prevent the integration of regional countries into the EU and NATO (Kapidžić et al., 2024).

These dynamics are perhaps most evident in BiH, where Russia has pursued influence through historical, cultural, and strategic channels. While Moscow supported the Serbs during the Bosnian war, it occasionally aligned with Western actors under international pressure, even endorsing the DPA despite Serb opposition. Notably, Russian peacekeepers were deployed in Bosnia between 1996 and 2003. Since the 2000s, Russia has used energy investments as a key instrument in its policy towards the Balkans (Sapmaz, 2003, pp. 77-79). In this regard, creating energy dependency has been one of Russia's main strategic leverages in the Western Balkans. BiH is overwhelmingly dependent on Russian natural gas, which is imported exclusively via the Turk Stream pipeline through Serbia (Turčalo, 2025, p. 9). Beyond the energy dimension, Russia has also sought to maintain its political foothold in BiH through RS. Moscow continues to exploit BiH's ethnic and institutional fragility as leverage against NATO and EU enlargement in the Western Balkans (Sapmaz, 2003, pp.83-85).

Against this backdrop of persistent Russian influence, the EU has positioned itself as the main external actor supporting Bosnia's stability and integration into European structures. The last three decades have witnessed a gradual but steady deepening of EU-BiH relations in the security, political and economic spheres. Despite considerable

challenges ranging from institutional deficiencies to political divisions, the EU has supported Bosnia's European integration through a combination of conditionality, financial assistance and security support. Strategic instruments and diplomatic initiatives such as the Stabilization and Association Process, the SAA and the IPA have jointly contributed to shaping the post-war process in BiH.

Nevertheless, the persistence of ethnic divisions and the limited pace of reforms have stalled BiH's EU integration process. At the same time, the growing geopolitical uncertainties in Europe have prompted the Union to reassess its enlargement policy. In this regard, the next section examines how the Russia-Ukraine War has influenced EU-BiH relations and considers possible future scenarios for BiH's integration into the Union.

The EU- BiH Relations After the Russia-Ukraine War: Geopolitical Recalibration and Renewed Engagement

Following Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014, the EU launched a number of initiatives (the Berlin Process¹, the 2018 Enlargement Strategy, and the Sofia Summit [the first Western Balkans summit since Thessaloniki in 2003]) in an attempt to revitalize its enlargement agenda (Tezcan, 2021, pp. 59-60). Unfortunately, between 2013 and 2022, the Union's enlargement policy lacked genuine momentum. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine shifted the geopolitical calculations, making enlargement a strategic priority for the Union and renewing its motivation to enlarge (Karjalainen, p. 637). Consequently, the geopolitical landscape of Europe shifted dramatically following the start of the Russia-Ukraine war on February 24, 2022, urging the EU to reassess its enlargement policy, particularly regarding the Western Balkan states.

Amidst this changing geopolitical context, the EU has expressed serious concern about the rising political instability in BiH, framing the situation as the most severe crisis since the close of the Bosnian war. As nationalist and separatist rhetoric increasingly challenges the foundations of the DPA, EU officials have continued to warn about potential threats to BiH's stability and territorial integrity. Highlighting the gravity of the situation, Josep Borrell, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy stated as follows: "The nationalist and separatist rhetoric is increasing in BiH and jeopardising the stability and even the integrity of the country. Ministers will have to take a decision on how to stop these dynamics in BiH and to avoid the country (falling) apart in pieces." His remarks, delivered during the Brussels meeting of EU foreign ministers, underscored the Union's growing alarm and the perceived need for timely and coordinated diplomatic action (Euronews, 2022). Reflecting the urgency, former High Representatives Christian Schwarz-Schilling and Valentin Inzko also urged the European Commission to expedite BiH's EU accession process without cumbersome bureaucratic procedures. Additionally, they called for NATO assurances to safeguard the population, advocating the deployment of NATO and EUFOR forces near the strategically critical Brčko District along the borders with Serbia and Croatia. They further suggested reconsidering Serbia's EU candidate status (Kučukalić, 2022, pp.17-118). Responding to these heightened concerns, the EU announced plans to double its troop presence in BiH as a precautionary response to potential regional instability. The EUFOR Althea mission, tasked by the United Nations with upholding the peace agreement, cautioned that the deterioration of the international security environment could destabilize BiH, and thus the additional deployment was a preventive measure (Kučukalić, 2022, p. 110).

¹ The Berlin Process, launched in 2014, aims to foster cooperation between the Western Balkans Six, EU member states, and host countries. While not an official EU initiative, it involves EU member states and institutions. "About the Berlin Process," *The Berlin Process*, <https://www.berlinprocess.de/>, (10.06.2025).

Consequently, BiH's long-stalled EU accession process gained unexpected momentum in this shifting geopolitical landscape. In October 2022, the European Commission issued a recommendation to grant candidate status to BiH, contingent upon the fulfilment of key reforms. Just two months later, in December 2022, Bosnia was officially granted candidate status by the European Council. The acceleration continued in December 2023, when the Council expressed readiness to initiate accession negotiations once Bosnia met the required membership conditions, requesting a progress report by March 2024. Following the European Commission's positive assessment on March 12, 2024, the start of accession talks with BiH was approved by the European Council, which instructed the Commission to draft the negotiation framework (European Commission).

Unfortunately, the acceleration in BiH -EU relations was not due to BiH's rapid ascent up the EU integration ladder. Instead, this rapid intensification was primarily driven by geopolitical shifts triggered by the Russia-Ukraine War and its destabilizing impacts (D'urso -Vetrini, 2023, pp. 7-8). As explained above, BiH's complex political system together with the separatist rhetoric and the pro-Russian as well as pro-Serbian stance of the RS government, has generated concerns about the potential spill over effects of the war in Ukraine. Such concerns have led the EU to open the door of enlargement, which had long remained closed, somewhat wider, despite the fact that Bosnia had not made significant progress in meeting the accession criteria. As outlined in the Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023 Report, the European Council's decision to award Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status in December 2022 generated a degree of political momentum, but the report notes that progress in addressing the core priorities outlined in the European Commission's Opinion remained limited. The report further highlights that although some advancements were observed at the state level, these were largely offset by actions taken by the RS entity. Recent developments in RS have further raised concerns about BiH's democratic and legal order. The entity's actions, challenging the authority of the Constitutional Court and restricting media freedom and civil society through repressive legislation, have been identified as major shortcomings undermining judicial independence, the rule of law, and democratic principles (European Commission, 2023, pp. 3-4). The 2024 EU Progress Report for BiH also highlighted several critical shortcomings, including limited progress on democratic reforms, persistent discrimination in electoral and constitutional frameworks, and a weakening of judicial independence. Corruption and organized crime remain inadequately addressed, with insufficient cooperation between enforcement bodies. In RS in particular, fundamental rights continue to suffer due to unresolved constitutional discrimination, restrictive laws targeting civil society, and restricted media freedom. Additionally, politicized public administration and inadequate merit-based recruitment further impede effective governance (European Commission, 2024).

Although the likelihood of direct Russian intervention in BiH is low due to the presence of EUFOR and the high potential costs, Russia still possesses the means and capacity to undermine stability in the country through other channels. Russia relies on hybrid tactics, exploiting BiH's internal vulnerabilities such as pro-Russian Serb sentiments, weak institutions, corruption, paramilitary activity, and energy dependence. Russia spreads propaganda through Serbian-language media in the Western Balkans to fuel divisions, undermine NATO and the EU, distort the war in Ukraine, and strengthen pro-Russian, anti-Western attitudes among Bosnian Serbs (Bryjka, 2022, p.6).

At the core of Bosnia's current political impasse stands RS leader Milorad Dodik, whose separatist policies have severely constrained avenues for democratic progress. Under Dodik's leadership, RS adopted a more assertive separatist stance frequently

threatening independence referenda and opposing international oversight. Although plans to withdraw from national institutions were postponed due to the Ukraine War, separatist rhetoric intensified after Dodik returned to the RS presidency in November 2022, notably challenging Constitutional Court and High Representative decisions throughout 2023. In December 2023, Dodik openly threatened independence contingent upon the outcome of the 2024 U.S. presidential election. After being indicted by prosecutors, Dodik's trial began in February 2024. He warned of possible instability if the UN acknowledges the 1995 Srebrenica genocide (Fella, 2024, p.5).

On February 26, 2025, Dodik received a one-year prison sentence and was barred from holding public office for six years due to his defiance of the High Representative. This ruling exemplifies the ongoing tensions between Dodik and High Representative Christian Schmidt, illustrating both BiH's institutional fragility and limitations of international oversight (Delauney, 2014). Dodik's defiance drew immediate reactions from his protectors: First and foremost, the Russian President Vladimir Putin condemned the decision as politically motivated (The Moscow Times, 2025), while Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić labelled it "shameful" (Özdemir et. al., 2025).

To sum up, in recent years, BiH appears to be climbing the EU integration ladder two steps at a time; yet it is simultaneously on the verge of a political crisis that could jeopardize this progress. Despite nominal advances, the country remains ethnically divided and dominated by entrenched nationalist elites. Fragile central institutions, minimal political cooperation, and persistent emigration continue to hinder economic development and long-term stability of BiH (Delauney, 2025). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has profoundly influenced EU–BiH relations, accelerating BiH's integration not as a result of domestic reform efforts, but rather because of shifting geopolitical imperatives. The following section critically examines whether these external dynamics present a genuine opportunity for BiH, or whether the accelerated accession path merely conceals the country's unresolved structural challenges.

A brief cost-benefit analysis of the Russia-Ukraine War: a threat or a catalyst?

The Russia-Ukraine War has acted as a geopolitical crossroads for the EU, causing a reassessment of its enlargement strategy, particularly in relation to the Western Balkans. It has also marked a critical juncture for BiH, influencing both its internal dynamics and its prospects for EU integration.

At first glance, the Russia-Ukraine War appears to be a destabilizing force in the Western Balkans, particularly in countries like BiH and Kosovo, where the high concentration of Serb populations makes ethno-national relations especially fragile. The entrenchment of ethnicity in institutions and territorial divisions has reinforced ethnic segregation in BiH, while ongoing polarization continues to hinder democratic progress and reconciliation, even three decades after the Bosnian war (Ağır and Gürsoy, 2016, p. 9). This dynamic, reinforced by the support that Dodik continues to receive from both Russia and Serbia, has intensified concerns about the erosion of the Dayton framework and the fragility of the country's territorial integrity. Russia's long-standing engagement in the Balkans, rooted in Slavic-Orthodox kinship with the Serbs and sustained support for Serbian nationalism, has further complicated the situation (Progonati, 2015, pp. 105, 108, 109).

As is well known, Russia's primary strategic objective in the Western Balkans is to prevent the NATO membership of the countries in the region. In this context, Russian officials frequently state in their rhetoric that Bosnia's steps toward joining NATO would be regarded as a hostile act (Reuters, 2021, March 18). Igor Kalabukhov, the Russian

Ambassador to BiH, stated that “In the example of Ukraine, we have shown what we expect. If there is a threat, we will react.” These remarks were interpreted by the Bosniak member of the Presidency Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Šefik Džaferović, as an “attack on the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Öztürk, 2022, March 18). These statements demonstrate that Russia instrumentalizes the Ukraine war as a deterrent narrative in the Western Balkans, reawakening the trauma of war in BiH.

From this perspective, the war seems to have exacerbated existing fault lines. Yet paradoxically, the same geopolitical shock has also re-energized BiH’s long-stalled EU integration process, culminating in the country’s candidate status in December 2022. The 2019 Commission Opinion found Bosnia and Herzegovina unprepared for membership and tied progress to the implementation of 14 Key Priorities. However, little reform was achieved. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the shifting geopolitical context led the EU to reassess enlargement. With candidate status granted to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, leaving BiH out became politically unwise. As a result, despite limited reforms, BiH was granted candidate status on geopolitical grounds. This duality raises a critical question: Is the war a threat or a catalyst?

The answer ultimately depends on BiH’s capacity to address its structural deficiencies, as well as the EU’s ability to recalibrate its enlargement strategy. This study contends that if the EU treats recent steps as more than symbolic gestures and demonstrates a genuine political will to support substantive reform and integration in BiH, then the war may indeed represent an unexpected opportunity for the country. For this to materialize, however, the EU should recalibrate its strategy, moving beyond crisis management toward a proactive, credible, and consistent enlargement policy based on democratic conditionality and long-term institutional engagement.

Whether this momentum can be transformed into genuine progress depends largely on the effectiveness of EU conditionality in BiH, which has historically been limited compared to other enlargement cases. BiH, as a de facto international protectorate, has not responded to EU conditionality in the same way as Central and Eastern European states. The simultaneous processes of peacebuilding and state-building after the DPA have been constrained by the country’s complex institutional structure. In this regard, the EU’s focus on state-building rather than on compliance with the *acquis* in candidate countries, together with the unclear benchmarks it proposed and internal divisions among member states regarding enlargement, have significantly weakened the effectiveness of EU conditionality. By contrast, NATO conditionality in the context of defence reform succeeded due to strong international leadership and locally adapted conditions (Babuna, 2014, pp. 11-12).

Building on this comparison, Babuna argues that the EU ought to reconsider its enlargement strategy toward BiH and adopt a post-conflict approach that reflects the country’s political and institutional realities. It is evident that the consistent and credible application of conditionality is key to keeping reform efforts on track. (Babuna, 2014, pp. 11-12). Similarly, Kučukalić underlines that the traditional carrot-and-stick approach of the EU is proving ineffective, highlighting the need to readjust conditionality with a stronger emphasis on security concerns. As regional threats intensify, former High Representatives of the OHR argue that a new and accelerated path to EU and NATO membership could bolster BiH’s sovereignty. From this perspective, it is urgent for the EU to develop a new strategy for BiH, as this is vital not only for the country’s future but also for the stability of Europe as a whole (Kučukalić, 2022, pp. 119-120). Yet, caution is warranted. As Debroeyer highlights, a security and geopolitics- oriented conditionality approach, which emerged in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, could undermine both

the Union itself and the very rationale for accession in candidate states (Debroeyer, 2024, pp. 20-21).

At the same time, the debate on conditionality cannot be separated from a deeper structural dilemma within the EU's enlargement policy: the persistent tendency to prioritize short-term stability over democratic consolidation. In this context, any new strategy should also address this dilemma. One of the most prominent criticisms directed at the EU is that it sacrifices democracy for stability. In his influential work "The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies", Florian Bieber (2018) defines stabilitocracies as regimes that claim to ensure stability, profess commitment to EU integration, yet rely on clientelist and informal networks, media control, and the fuelling of recurring crises to weaken democratic governance and adherence to the rule of law. Bieber argues that by turning a blind eye to authoritarian tendencies and continuing to support these regimes' EU membership aspirations, the EU has contributed to the emergence of stabilitocracies in the Western Balkans (Bieber, 2018, pp. 176-178). This critique is notably relevant in the case of BiH, which, despite initial optimism, has increasingly exhibited features of a stabilitocracy in the past twenty years. Democratic regression has been tolerated by the EU and Western powers as long as the local authorities preserved regional stability (Kučukalić, 2022, p. 107).

This study argues that a new EU strategy must reconcile two imperatives: the urgent need to address regional security threats and the long-term necessity of democratic transformation. These goals do not conflict with each other; rather, they should be pursued simultaneously to ensure lasting stability. Within this broader framework, Serbia emerges as a critical actor. Being the largest state in the region and a central hub for regional political dynamics, Serbia's EU path will significantly influence the progress or setbacks of the EU's engagement in the Western Balkans. While formally committed to EU accession, Serbia continues to maintain close ties with Russia and shows ambivalence toward key democratic and foreign policy norms. Its domestic politics also exhibit many of the features Bieber attributes to stabilitocracies-media control, clientelism, and democratic backsliding (Bieber, 2018, pp. 180-183). This paper advances the argument that any meaningful readjustment of the EU's strategy requires a more assertive and conditional engagement with Serbia. The EU should offer clearer incentives for reform while drawing firmer red lines against authoritarian tendencies. Serbia's position on Kosovo, its stance toward Russian aggression in Ukraine, and its internal undemocratic developments should no longer be treated as isolated issues, but as core benchmarks of its EU candidacy.

In the final analysis, the study shows that the Russia-Ukraine War has highlighted both the persistent vulnerabilities and the geostrategic importance of the Western Balkans for the EU. The region is at a critical juncture, as the different but interconnected examples of BiH and Serbia demonstrate. The EU should go beyond symbolic commitments, inconsistent conditionality and ad hoc crisis management if it is to achieve meaningful and sustainable engagement with the Western Balkans. Instead, it should adopt a more coherent and inclusive enlargement strategy that integrates security needs and democratic adherence. Only by tackling these two challenges in parallel can the EU hope to regain its normative influence and achieve real stability in the Western Balkans. Ultimately, only an extensive restructuring of the EU's enlargement strategy will enable BiH and the wider region to make genuine progress toward EU membership.

Conclusion

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War on 24 February 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has significantly impacted the European security order. As a direct consequence, the EU's enlargement agenda, long trapped in inertia, has entered a phase of

renewed vitality. This renewed momentum has been most visible in the Western Balkans. BiH provides a particularly revealing case for examining the implications of the war for EU enlargement. This study demonstrates that the Russia-Ukraine War has profoundly reshaped the dynamics of EU-BiH relations, creating both challenges and opportunities for the country's EU integration. On the one hand, the war reawakened old insecurities in the Western Balkans, exacerbating BiH's internal fragilities and heightening concerns over separatist tendencies and Russian influence. On the other hand, it generated unprecedented geopolitical momentum for enlargement, culminating in BiH's candidate status in December 2022 and the approval to open accession talks in March 2024.

However, BiH's progress remains fragile and uneven. While the EU's decisions have provided political momentum, they were driven more by external geopolitical imperatives than by BiH's internal reforms. The persistence of ethnic divisions, democratic backsliding, and weak institutions continue to undermine the country's readiness for accession. This duality highlights the limitations of EU conditionality in BiH, which has historically been less effective compared to other enlargement cases.

The findings in this study underscore that the future of BiH's EU integration depends on BiH's capacity to address its structural shortcomings, as well as on the EU's ability to recalibrate its enlargement strategy. The Union should move beyond symbolic gestures, short-term stability concerns, and ad hoc crisis management, towards a more credible, consistent, and security-conscious enlargement policy. At the same time, democratic transformation must not be sacrificed in the name of stability.

Finally, the study argues that Serbia's path will play a decisive role in shaping the broader regional context. Due to the politically sensitive presence of ethnic Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo, the EU's enlargement strategy in the Western Balkans will remain incomplete without establishing a more assertive and conditional relationship with Serbia. Thus, the study argues that the war can have two profoundly different results: It can either serve as a negative turning point that entrenches instability and authoritarian tendencies in the region or it can become a catalyst if it pushes the EU to adopt a more coherent enlargement policy that reconciles security imperatives with democratic reforms. Only such an approach can ensure meaningful progress for BiH and secure long-term stability in the Western Balkans.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Russia-Ukraine War began on 24 February 2022 with the Russian Federation's (Russia) invasion of Ukraine and has deeply affected the European security architecture. The European Union (EU) enlargement policy, which had been in a stagnation phase for many years, has experienced a revival due to the impact of the war. The European integration processes of the Western Balkan countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), have made significant progress. This study analyzes the effects of geopolitical fragility and concerns over European security caused by the Russia-Ukraine War on the EU enlargement policy through the Bosnian case. It seeks to answer the following question: "Is the Russia-Ukraine War an opportunity or a threat for BiH's EU integration?"

The study considers the Russia-Ukraine War as a turning point in EU-BiH relations and analyses BiH's EU integration process in terms of the pre-war and post-war periods. The EU, which failed to diplomatically stop the wars that broke out in the Balkans during the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and remained militarily under NATO's security umbrella, was only able to strengthen its relations with the Western Balkan countries after the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), which ended the Bosnian War in 1995. Through various political mechanisms, notably the Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs), it has since engaged more actively in the region. The Union has played a key role in BiH through financial aid, political engagement, police reform, and security support. However, deep ethnic divisions, a weak centralized structure and the rise of ethnic nationalism in BiH have undermined the reform process and prevented consistent progress in the accession process. At the same time, the political and economic challenges within the EU, together with the divergent perspectives of member states towards enlargement, have initiated a process often described as "enlargement fatigue", leading the Union to refrain from opening its door to candidate countries.

Only after the geopolitical recalibration triggered by the Russia-Ukraine War, did the Union revive its enlargement policy. The EU has accelerated the integration processes of the Western Balkan countries, with the aim of reducing fragility and limiting Russia's influence in the region. BiH was granted candidate country status in December 2022 and in March 2024, the decision was taken to open accession negotiations. However, as the

European Commission's country reports on BiH make clear, these developments have been driven more by external security concerns than by domestic reform progress. In particular, the separatist rhetoric of Republika Srpska (RS) leader Milorad Dodik and his close ties with Russia continue to pose a serious challenge to the stability of the country.

In the final analysis, the Russia-Ukraine War enabled Russia to disrupt the balance in the Western Balkans, by reinforcing Dodik's separatist rhetoric and actions, thereby contributing the destabilization of BiH. At the same time, however, it has heightened the strategic importance of BiH and more broadly, the Western Balkans for the EU, thereby accelerating the region's EU integration process. In this context, is the Russia-Ukraine war a threat or an opportunity for BiH?

The answer much depends on whether the EU can move beyond symbolic commitments and develop a new enlargement strategy that combines security concerns with the need for democratic reform in a comprehensive manner. Otherwise, the impetus created after the war may prove short-lived failing to produce meaningful structural transformation. In this context, the study argues that it is vital for the EU to develop a clearer and more coherent relationship with BiH, as well as with other regional actors, particularly Serbia.