CHAPTER 6

Rather Lukewarm

Shifting Perceptions towards the EU among Bosnia and Herzegovina's Political Elites

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Abstract

In 2019, the European Commission endorsed Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH's) EU membership application, seen as a significant step. However, subsequent progress stalled as the country failed to address the 14 key priorities outlined in the Opinion. In 2022, in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU granted BiH candidate status. Surprisingly, local political elites displayed lukewarm enthusiasm, prompting research to understand their evolving attitudes towards EU integration. Using the external incentives model, seven interviews were conducted with diverse members of parliament. Findings reveal a decline in political support for EU integration, with elites perceiving BiH as unwelcome in the EU and doubting the impact of local efforts.

Geopolitical shifts are deemed crucial for accelerated integration, posing challenges to BiH's EU aspirations despite stable public support.

Keywords: EU, Bosnia and Herzegovina, EU integration, political elites, periphery

Introduction

In December 2022, the leaders of the EU unanimously decided to grant candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) – seven years after the country officially submitted its application for EU membership. Like many times before, the decision was made in the wake of geopolitical shifts leading to a readjustment of EU's policies and priorities (Dimitrova, 2016). A joint opinion published on the occasion by the EU Head of Delegation/EU Special Representative in BiH and the EU Heads of Mission in BiH stated that BiH 'has a special place in all our hearts', adding that the country has also been at the heart of European history (Sattler, 2022). While this was hailed as a historic moment and important milestone, the local reaction was nevertheless rather lukewarm. First, it was clear that the candidate status was a direct consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and completely unrelated to any actual changes and implemented reforms on the ground. Indeed, since the European Commission issued its Opinion on BiH's EU membership application in 2019, laying out 14 key priorities for the country to meet, little to no progress has been achieved to date. Second, Ukraine and Moldova had been granted EU candidate status six months before, thus once again heightening the local sense of being left out by EU decision-makers.

In this article, however, we explore whether the lukewarm response was also due to shifting perceptions towards the EU on the part of national politic elites. Interviewing seven members of parliament (MPs) from the two main ethnic groups and so-called Others, belonging to the ruling majority and to the opposition, we investigate to what extent their views towards EU integration have changed over the last decade and explore potential antecedents of these changes. While the public support for EU integration has been rather stable over the last ten years (more on this below), potential shifts on the part of elected political elites might point to some important trends for the future. Thus, the main aim of this chapter is to examine and discuss the perceptions of BiH's political elites of this troubled and rather complex

periphery. Having in mind that the EU integration process has always been elite driven, the chapter also investigates the question of EU credibility in the national context and whether political elites deem that there is an alternative to EU integration.

Country Context: The Bosnian War and Its Consequences for EU Integration

This is not the place to discuss the Bosnian War from 1992 to 1995 in detail. We merely touch upon it because it helps to better understand the post-war dynamics within the country, as well as its relations with the EU. While one might question the relevance of these consequences given that the conflict ended almost three decades ago, it is by now well established that wartime experiences endure long after their formal end, and even after the historical, political, and economic conditions that generated them have disappeared (Bar-Tal, 2000; 2001; 2007; Guiso et al., 2008).

In the case of BiH, it left a country deeply divided, with three different and irreconcilable interpretations when it comes to the past (Mochtak & Muharemović, 2022), no shared vision of the future, and regular challenges regarding the state's very existence (Bieber, 2011; Džankić & Keil, 2019). Indeed, there is almost no aspect of life that remains untouched by the war, whether we talk about demographic changes (Kadušić & Suljić, 2018), economic development (Kešeljević & Spruk, 2021), human capital accumulation (Efendic et al., 2022), pro-social behaviour (Efendic, 2020), or peoples' attitudes towards risk and trust (Muminović & Efendic, 2022). The country remains in a state of frozen conflict (Perry, 2018), and all of these consequences ultimately also have a bearing on the political dynamics within BiH and its relationship with the EU.

Furthermore, we devote this section to the Bosnian War also because the country's constitutional set-up directly derives from Annex IV to the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), which created arguably one of the most complicated political systems in the world. In short, the DPA established a state with two entities, one district, ten cantons, and three constituent peoples (Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats), as well as a distinction between so-called Citizens and Others, all on top of the general malaise of the Western Balkans characterized by weak parliaments and judicial institutions (Bieber, 2018). According to Džankić &

Keil (2019), BiH presents a case of challenged nationhood and limited statehood. While this does not automatically mean that we are talking about a weak state (Fukuyama, 2004), BiH's state is nonetheless limited with regard to its strength and functioning (Bieber, 2011). As a result, it is unable to meet the requirements of EU integration when it comes to the adoption of the necessary norms and rules (Börzel, 2011; Daviddi, 2023). Finally, the DPA also legitimized acts of ethnic cleansing without putting in place a mechanism that would allow for reconciliation and a functioning state (Perry, 2018).

Europeanization as a Driver of Reforms in BiH?

About a decade ago, researchers still wondered if the EU could use its transformative power to successfully integrate the Western Balkans, as it previously had to integrate countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Freyburg & Richter, 2010). Today, however, the answer seems to be much more pessimistic. Indeed, compared with the countries from Central and Eastern Europe, the Europeanization of the Western Balkans and BiH has been slower, mired in repeated setbacks, and in some cases has even regressed (Börzel, 2011). As a result, not only is unconditional and sustained support for the EU no longer the norm, but there are increasing concerns about possible de-Europeanization (Gherasim, 2020; Müller et al., 2021).

According to Dimitrova (2016), the EU path is no longer viewed as having no alternative, as the following statement by the president of the Respublika Srpska (RS), Milorad Dodik, from April 2023 makes clear (RTRS vijesti, 2023):

> China is a significant partner … I am preparing sometime during the year to go to China and try to develop even better relations … The EU is not the only alternative … Of course, we remain on the European path, but obviously that path is falling apart on its own as far as the European Union is concerned.

At least in theory, however, Europeanization was supposed to be the most promising way of overcoming tensions and promoting reforms (Uvalić, 2019), which prompts the question of why the region has largely been an exception to the success of pervious decades.

There are many answers to this question, of course, but a lot has to do with the changed context (Džankić & Keil, 2019) and a combination

of 'enlargement fatigue' and 'accession fatigue'. More specifically, the Western Balkan countries undoubtedly face more serious challenges relating to EU accession than any of their predecessors, when it comes to both the content and the breadth of the required reforms (Dimitrova, 2016). In general, they face widespread scepticism with regard to their place in the EU, lower administrative capacity, and unresolved internal issues because of the turbulent 1990s (Zhelyazkova et al., 2019).

Indeed, if one investigates the case of BiH and its Europeanization, the reasons behind the lack of success are to be found on both sides, namely the political elites as well as the EU. With regard to local political elites, they misuse the institutional framework and the political system to block reforms and use the status quo to stay in power (Burianová & Hloušek, 2022). The EU, in turn, believes that the current political elite is not genuinely committed to or interested in reforms (Daviddi, 2023). On the other hand, it is also true that the EU has not been an effective state-builder, being unwilling to use its conditionality for this purpose and ill equipped to deal with the Western Balkan countries, particularly BiH (Bieber, 2011; Börzel, 2011).[1] In the words of Perry (2018, p. 13), 'the EU enlargement process was designed as a tool to prepare and integrate new members – it is not and was never intended to be a mechanism for state-building, let alone for resolving violent, territorial conflicts'. So, to summarize, weak states, diverging identities, no shared vision, and the EU's inconsistencies and lack of strategy are often offered as the primary explanations for the region's slow progress on the EU path (Koneska, 2019).

Overall, the external incentives model (EIM) developed by Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier (2020) probably presents the dominant theoretical framework for understanding the EU accession process and is therefore used for our subsequent analysis. In short, it holds that successful Europeanization and the effectiveness of conditionally depend on four factors: (1) the determinacy and consistency of EU conditions, (2) the credibility of accession, (3) the capacity of candidate countries, and (4) domestic costs. We will not discuss each of these in detail but rather will focus on those factors that are found to be most important and relevant for BiH when it comes to internal perceptions of the EU, most notably credibility and the internal costs of reforms.

Credibility and Conditionality

Credibility is recognized as the crucial element in accounting for the success of EU conditionality (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020; Džankić & Keil, 2019). In short, it refers to a credible promise that the country will move forward if meets the conditions set out. Indeed, Börzel (2011) has argued that even in weak states, Europeanization can advance provided there is genuine credibility coupled with significant financial and technical assistance. At least in theory, at the European Council meeting in Thessaloniki in 2003, the EU confirmed and reinforced the membership perspective for the Western Balkans.

In practice, however, its actual commitment towards the region is seriously brought into question. According to a high-ranking diplomat and former deputy head of the EU Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the EU seems to be experiencing a serious credibility problem in the country (Daviddi, 2023). Ever since the 2008 global financial crisis and the subsequent European debt crisis, the EU has been mired in various internal and external crises, including Brexit, the refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While none of these was caused by enlargement – at least not directly – the EU nonetheless became self-absorbed, and political and public support for the accession of new member states decreased (Bieber, 2018). According to Dimitrova (2016), declining public support for enlargement has been one of the primary reasons behind the EU's lower credibility. Unlike with the Eastern enlargement, there has simply been no consensus within the EU when it comes to the Western Balkan countries, the accession of which, according to Zhelyazkova et al. (2019), faces the lowest levels of credibility in the history of enlargement.

Another complicating factor is the EU's early decision to assess the accession of the Western Balkan countries individually based on merit, rather than as a group. This was meant to increase the credibility of the accession process (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020), yet in the case of BiH it may have had an adverse effect. To provide just one example, Džankić & Keil (2019) note that BiH remains a contested state, not only internally but also externally. For instance, and despite its continuous secessionist rhetoric, Serbia remains strongly supportive of the Respublika Srpska (BiH's predominantly Serb entity) and its elites. The possible earlier EU accession of Serbia could thus cause

additional problems for the country, similar to those Croatia experienced from Slovenia during its accession.[2]

With regard to public perception in the EU, the Eurobarometer survey published in the summer of 2022 finds that almost six in ten EU citizens now support the enlargement of the EU – an increase of ten percentage points compared with the previous year (European Commission, 2022). While this could be seen as a welcome development, it is most likely due to the greater European solidarity in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine – hence it is questionable whether this positive trend will prevail in the coming years. Indeed, the latest survey already notes a decline in enlargement support of five percentage points (European Commission, 2023). During our interviews, we thus particularly decided to focus on the question of credibility and conditionality, exploring how credible local politicians deem the EU to be when it comes to the country's membership perspective.

Internal Costs

The greater the demands on the EU path, the higher the adoption costs for local elites (Dimitrova, 2016). In countries where European identity is a broadly shared value and goal, the political costs of reforms can potentially be overcome (Subotic, 2011). Yet once demands start touching upon identity-sensitive and constitutional issues, the adoption costs are deemed too high, so that any rational cost–benefit analyses become almost impossible (Freyburg & Richter, 2010). In this case, the EU's insistence on difficult reforms pertaining to national identity and competencies can even backfire and have an adverse effect on support (Zhelyazkova et al., 2019). As a result, political elites or certain groups within the country potentially cease any further cooperation.

Furthermore, demands of the accession process can sometimes even have worse unintended consequences and increase the chance of inter-ethnic conflict, particularly in unconsolidated and contested states such as BiH (Džankić & Keil, 2019). As a result, instead of defusing ethnicization and promoting cooperation, EU policies can tend to create a hostile environment (Koneska, 2019). In a country like BiH where the three ethnic groups have strong veto powers, this can lead, and in fact has led, to years of stagnation.

While it is conventional wisdom that every country that wished to join the EU had to reform its constitution in order to increase its

strength and functionality (Bieber, 2011; Perry, 2018), it is questionable whether any ethnic group in BiH would ever agree to give up its constitutional position and power mechanisms for the sake of EU integration. This is another important question that we consider during our interviews.

Determinacy and Local Capacity

With regard to determinacy and local capacity, the former refers to precise expectations about what it is that a country needs to do and whether these conditions are consistently applied over time, while the latter refers to the country's capability to meet the demands of EU integration. When it comes to determinacy and the conditions set by the EU, they vary significantly in terms of their precision and binding nature (Zhelyazkova et al., 2019). Indeed, the EU has at times tied progress on the BiH's EU path to human rights and constitutional matters, then switching to socio-economic reforms and then moving on to questions of rule of law and public administration. As a result, the EU's approach towards BiH has been deemed erratic, contradictory, and unsuccessful by one of its former employees (Daviddi, 2023). Concerning the country's local capacity, that of BiH is probably the lowest of all prospective members' states aside from Kosovo. This is particularly problematic if one has in mind that conditions have become more demanding over time (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020), inevitably leading to stagnation. However, we do not consider these two factors crucial for our exploration of shifting local perceptions towards the EU and do not discuss them any further.

External and Internal Perceptions

Who belongs to the periphery and who does not is not just a matter of objective economic indicators, but is rather a fluid, subjective, and intangible assessment that has shifted throughout history. While all countries considered in this book have their own complexities and peculiarities that complicate their relationship with the EU, BiH presents a special case on its own because of the specific constitutional setting and the political system described above. While geographically it is undoubtedly a part of Europe, the question has always been

whether this is the case culturally. Two things seem to complicate BiH's position.

The first has to do with BiH's multi-ethnic composition and the fact that it is one of few European countries with a majority Muslim population. While the open denial of Islam as part of Europe has become somewhat of a taboo, Huntington's (1996) popular notion whereby Western Christianity presents the European dividing line persists to this day, as can often be seen from statements made by the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán (Euronews, 2021; Aljazeera, 2021). As Todorova (2009) has noted, Ottoman elements – of which the most important is certainly Islam – are what is most commonly invoked in current prejudices and stereotypes about the Balkans in general, and BiH in particular.

The second – also shared with other countries in this book – is the simple fact that BiH belongs to the Balkans, which has historically served as a mirror image against which the idea of the West has been constructed. According to Žižek and Horvat (2013), the Balkans are seen as the Other of the West. The fact that the EU itself does not know what its cultural identity is and whether it exists in the first place (Meyer, 2004; Nida-Rümelin & Weidenfeld, 2007) is almost irrelevant here. What is important is that the Balkans are generally seen as something barbarian, lethargic, passive, lazy, and inefficient, and as a source of instability (Dimitrova, 2016).

Interestingly, however, these external perceptions are often shared internally. Even in the local languages, 'Balkan' has a derogative meaning, understood as something 'uncultivated' and 'backward' (Todorova, 2009). There is a good recent illustration of these views in relation to Croatia's accession to the Schengen zone and pending introduction of the euro. The country's most read media portal published an op-ed at the end of 2022 titled 'The Final Departure of Croatia from the Balkans'. The author triumphantly declares that, after 104 years, Croatia is returning to the group of countries to which it belongs in terms of civilization, reinforcing the image of the Balkans as something uncivilized and backwards (Vojković, 2022). A similar headline, 'Bye-Bye Balkans!', had already appeared in 2005 when accession negotiations between Croatia and the EU started (Žižek & Horvat, 2013). Indeed, the Croatian national identity is built upon a Balkan/European dichotomy which difficult political decisions, particularly those pertaining
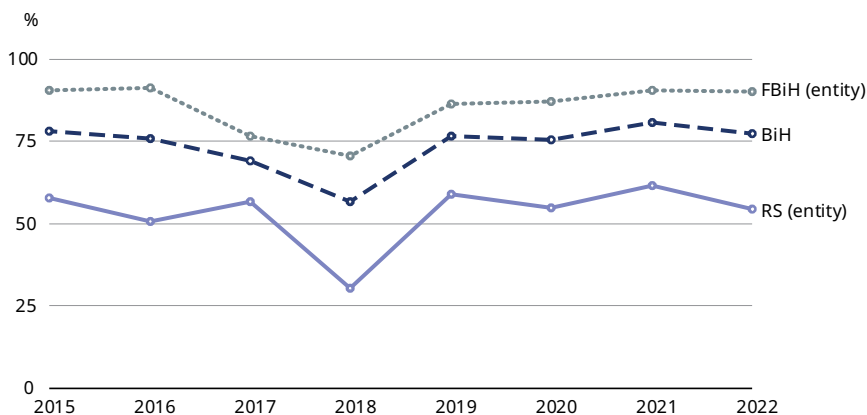
Figure 6.1: Share of BiH citizens responding 'in favour' to the question 'If tomorrow was a referendum for EU membership with the question "do you support BiH's entry into to the EU?", how would you vote?'
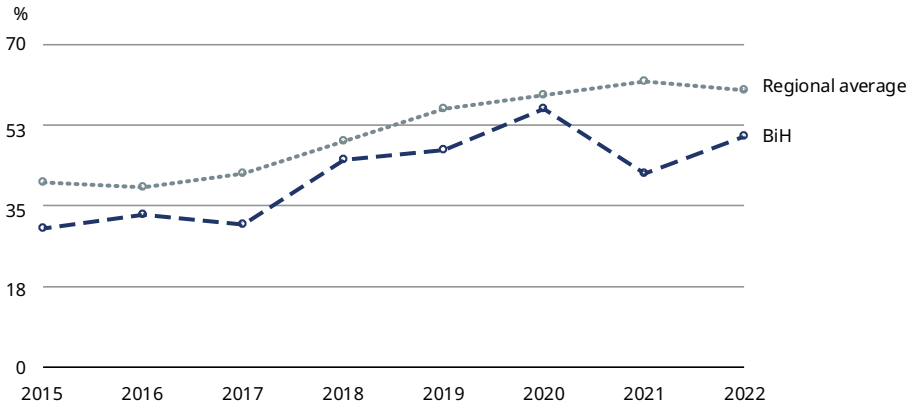Source: authors' illustration based on DEI (2023).

to cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (Subotic, 2011).

Internal perspectives on the EU have been rather stable over the last decade, at least when it comes to the public. This can be seen from Figure 6.1.

Looking at Figure 6.1, few things are obvious: first, while there have been some variations over the years, support for EU integration is strong and relatively stable across the country (about seven in ten people would vote in favour of EU membership). Second, however, there are significant regional variations. While support in the FBiH entity (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, predominantly populated by Bosnians and Croats) is almost 90 per cent, in the RS (predominantly populated by Serbs) it is only slightly higher than 50 per cent, albeit still a majority.

In Figure 6.2 we look at the Regional Cooperation Council's annual Balkan Barometer survey 2022. The question asked every year is 'Do you think that EU membership would be a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad for your economy?'

Again, few things are clearly visible from Figure 6.2. First, the share of BiH citizens who believe that EU membership would be a good thing increased from 2015 onwards, peaked in 2020, and has

Figure 6.2: Share of citizens stating that EU membership would be a good
  thing
Source: authors' illustration based on Regional Cooperation Council (2022).

somewhat decreased since. Second, despite a positive trend, the share
has been consistently lower than the regional average and is the lowest
after that of Serbia. It is also worth adding that a third of respond-
ents from BiH believe that EU membership will never happen, which
is again the most pessimistic view after that of citizens from Serbia
(Regional Cooperation Council, 2022).

Taken together, the two graphs beg the following question. How is
it that just around 40 per cent of BiH citizens believe that EU accession
would be a good thing, while 70 per cent would support it if asked at
a referendum? While one can only speculate at this point about a pos-
sible answer, the most plausible one seems to be that citizens simply do
not see any alternative. As Uvalić (2019) has noted and for geographi-
cal, historical, cultural, geopolitical, and economic reasons, the EU
remains the only option for the Western Balkan region. Consequently,
we are interested in whether these views are also shared by politicians
and whether they see an alternative to the EU. This is of particular
importance given that politicians and political parties have tremen-
dous power in shaping and altering public opinion, even when their
positions are contrary to citizens' previously held attitudes (Slothuus
& Bisgaard, 2021).

Methodology

To reiterate, we are interested in whether and to what extent the subjective perceptions of local political elites with regard to the EU have changed over the last decade. As a result, this article addresses the following research questions:

- How do BiH political elites perceive the EU integration process and BiH as an EU periphery?
- Do political elites contest the process of EU integration?

With the aim of addressing the defined research questions, we opted for a qualitative, single-case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009). Thus, we used several data collection techniques to ensure high construct validity through data triangulation (Eisenhardt, 1989, Yin, 2009). The first step of the analysis was desk research where relevant and most recent academic literature, studies, and reports on the EU and BiH were gathered. The aim of this was to identify key themes and developments in the current country policy context. We systematically organized and analysed this data, focusing on the features of EU integration processes in BiH, such as credibility, consistency, and the perceptions of the integration process among national political elites.

In the second step of the research process, primary empirical data was gathered by conducting interviews with seven politicians from the country (see Appendix, Table A6.1). The interviews took place after the general elections that were held in October 2022 and during the process of government formation, hence statements were more likely to reflect a genuine stance on the EU than short-term electoral interests. Given the country's ethnic and administrative divisions, it was important to ensure that the small sample was as diversified as possible, hence a purposive sampling method was used. We primarily targeted members of the BiH Parliamentary Assembly who are also participating in the work of the Joint Committee on European Integration, and we talked to representatives of the two main ethnic groups (Bosnians and Serbs) as well as those who identify themselves as Others. Finally, we included representatives from both the ruling coalition and the opposition.

The interviews were semi-structured and followed interview guidelines prepared in advance. We tried to encourage interviewees to talk as much as possible, minimizing the interviewer's involvement (Rubin

& Rubin, 2005). Inevitably, some implicit statements were made by the interviewees, which at times requires us to move towards a more latent or integrative level of our data. With regard to procedural ethics, all prior conditions for this research were obtained (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The relevant ethics form was approved and participants were assured of their anonymity and absolute confidentiality. The research team proceeded to identify the common themes and patterns in the gathered data, having in mind possible variations in perspective across the interviewees. As the last step of the analysis, the research team integrated the inductively formed first-order codes with the deductively formed primary codes (based on the theoretical framework and the concepts presented in Chapter 1 of this volume) to explain the challenges of EU integration and the perceptions of BiH political elites.

Analysis and Results

A thematic analysis with the aim of identifying coherence and patterns of meaning from the data obtained was used to contextualize the conducted research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although perceptions of the EU varied across our subjects, we were nonetheless able to discern some coherence and the following patterns.

Lack of Credibility and Consistency

Almost all of the interviewed MPs do not believe that the country's EU perspective is genuine and credible and see several proofs of this. The first refers to a general lack of trust that the EU truly wishes to see BiH as a future member state. Islamophobia was also mentioned by one of the Bosnian MPs that we interviewed. Another MP noted that EU conditionality amounts to a constant raising of the bar, in full awareness that the country will never be able to meet it. Asked whether the EU would change its stance towards BiH in a hypothetical scenario where the country meets all of its conditions, the same MP stated that the EU would always come up with new and additional requirements, simply because there is no genuine commitment to the integration of the region. This sentiment was echoed by another MP:

> They talk about 14 priorities for BiH. Even if we meet 114 priorities, they will never grant us status in the EU. (MP3)

However, the lack of credibility and consistency can be seen on the BiH side as well. High levels of corruption, lack of rule of law, and a weak judiciary system are areas in which the country does not fulfil the preconditions or pillars of the EU integration process. With regard to the reforms defined in the EC's 14 priorities, limited progress has been made, thus raising questions about the extent to which local political elites are genuinely willing to make changes. The progress over the years, across the country (two entities and Brčko District) and across policy areas, has not been consistent and comprehensive either.

At this point, it is difficult to overstate the devastating effects that France's blocking of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in 2019 had on the EU's credibility in the region. According to several MPs interviewed, this can be seen as a prime and symbolic example of the fact that even the most difficult and identity-sensitive reforms will ultimately not be rewarded by the EU. One of them took the fact that the EU supports policies that it would never tolerate in any of its member states – such as those strengthening the ethnic vis-à-vis the civic concept in the country – as a sign that it is not seriously considering BiH as a future member. From the perspective of Serb MPs, there is an additional layer of mistrust towards the EU. Some conditions are seen as undermining the constitutional position and competencies of the RS just for the sake of weakening its legitimacy.

According to one MP, the EU wished to alter the country's internal structure and demanded the centralization of certain functions, while similar conditions were never put in place for some existing member states which remain highly decentralized.[3]

Of the seven MPs that we interviewed, however, there was one who expressed no doubts that BiH would become a member state as soon as it met the necessary criteria. According to this respondent, the general critique regarding conditionality is just used as an excuse by those who do not genuinely wish to see the country move forward on the EU path:

> In our country, many colleagues accuse the EU of hypocrisy in a sense that 'We will never become members [regardless of what we do]'. I really think that the pessimistic messages just hide the desire to never join the European Union. (MP7)

Another frequent grievance voiced throughout the interviews relates to the EU's erratic and arbitrary changing of the conditions put before

the country. This point is worth emphasizing, since consistent conditionality is seen as the main factor in the EU's credibility (Rollis, 2021) and since a lack of definitiveness of the conditions and procedures significantly lowers the chances of the desired outcome (Blauberger & Van Hüllen, 2020). Unsurprisingly, the constantly changing requirements are taken as yet another proof that the membership perspective is not truly credible. Words often used to describe the EU's conditionality towards BiH are 'arbitrary', 'inconsistent', and 'unwarranted'. To quote one of the MPs:

> It's as if someone wakes up one morning and says 'Hmm, what could I set for those Bosnians?' and then comes up with several things. (MP1)

Yet, here again, the same MP quoted above (MP7) offered an alternative interpretation with regard to the EU's constant changing of requirements, seeing it as proof of a certain adaptability and creativity on the part of the EU when dealing with BiH, precisely because it wishes to see the country move forward.

Nonetheless, there is a shared understanding that BiH is simply not high on the EU's list of priorities any more and that people who have little or no experience with BiH oversee telling local politicians what to do.

> I have the feeling that we are no longer on the high-priority list, on the radar. Europe has a lot of its own challenges and I have the feeling that second-, third-rate people are now dealing with us. (MP5)

However, local politicians seem to believe that this could change in the case of external geopolitical shifts, with either the abandoning of conditions altogether or at least a lowering of the bar. According to one of the parliamentarians, the EU would show greater commitment towards the whole region and BiH only out of fear that it could face a similar scenario to Ukraine and become a black hole in the middle of Europe, which would endanger its security and economic interests. This is an important argument raised by local political elites from all sides. Indeed, new global geopolitical developments such as the war in Ukraine have the potential to shift the dynamics of BiH–EU relations. Two statements make this point well:

> The only one who can speed up that process [EU integration] is Putin, he is the accelerator of the EU path in general. If it wasn't for the conflict in Ukraine, we would never get the candidate status. (MP1)

> Due to the current geopolitical situation, that is, the war in Ukraine and aggression against Ukraine, we received the candidate status as a favour or sign of encouragement, which we would have never received if we had followed the conditionality, that is, the conditions set for us by the European Union. (MP2)

To summarize, there is a widespread belief that the EU is not really interested in the region or its future membership, that nothing that the country does or does not do ultimately makes a difference, and that the only thing that could change this is external factors. Even one of the most optimistic and pro-EU MPs interviewed said that they were much more optimistic about BiH's membership perspective a decade ago than they are today. As a result, it is unsurprising that the general view towards the EU is rather lukewarm, and that if the current national political elites stay in power, BiH might remain a troubled periphery rather than becoming an empowered and more developed one.

Enthusiasm for EU Integration Is Waning

Although there is still widespread support for EU integration, there is a discernible waning of enthusiasm. One of two exceptions refers to the youngest MP we interviewed, who had also spent some time living in the EU and thus showed an appreciation for and understanding of what life in the EU potentially means for BiH citizens. Overall, however, as one MP put it, the country's EU path has ceased to be 'a project of the heart' (MP1) and is nowadays primarily supported out of necessity. Whatever commitment towards the EU is left seems to be due primarily to a lack of alternative rather than to a genuine conviction that this is the way to go. This is well illustrated by the following statements:

> If there was any alternative, the EU would not be on the map as a foreign policy goal, so it is the non-existence of an alternative that still keeps the EU as something we can gather around. (MP1)

The very exit of the UK clearly showed that the EU is not as powerful a model any more as it is presented, because if it was truly something so good, the British would not have left it under any circumstances. (MP3)

If you ask citizens today, the euphoria for the EU has declined, that support is weaker than ten years ago, people are tired and to people this is further and further away. Basically, instead of Europe coming here, our people go to Europe and leave. (MP5)

While much hope was once placed in EU integration as something 'powerful', 'great', and 'wonderful', one of the MPs said that it has become a 'pointless project' (MP3). The same MP believes that BiH should develop bilateral relations with all powerful countries that could be beneficial for BiH when it comes to the economy and tourism.

Aside from the perceived lack of credibility and its relationship with the Western Balkans, we also noted a general disappointment in the way the EU has handled some of its crisis and instabilities, also seen as ultimately revealing its hypocrisy. Speaking about the allure of EU integration, several politicians made comments that illustrate this:

Ten years ago, I had much more enthusiasm, trust, and faith that it was really an organized and fair system, but unfortunately some things and actions refuted this. (MP4)

They closed their borders and then they tell us about human rights, they tell us how we should take care of migrants … they want to be our tutors, mentors, professors, but don't know how to behave themselves. (MP3)

The refugee crisis and the war in Ukraine had a significant impact because xenophobic policies of certain political groups within several EU member states came to the surface, which, in my opinion, is unfavourable for Bosnia and Herzegovina as a potential EU member. (MP6)

Yet, while there is a general lack of enthusiasm for the EU, EU integration is still hailed for its transformative power when it comes to creating better and more functional societies. Asked whether their stance towards the EU had changed over the last decade, two MPs said the following:

I look at the European Union as a set of values, rules, procedures, and standards and this has not changed for a second. For me, the least important thing is what it means and when we will formally become

a member of the European Union. To me, the more important thing is when we will meet European standards … It [an alternative to EU integration] does not exist. I don't see it. There is only one alternative, to be an isolated island that will remain empty in the heart of the Balkans where no one will remain. (MP5)

If my attitude has indeed changed, then I can say that I am even more committed towards the EU … among other things because the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is rapidly deteriorating in the political, economic, demographic and every other sense … I truly believe that the only solution for Bosnia and Herzegovina is membership in the EU, not just membership as such but the whole process that creates a better society. (MP7)

BiH political elites need to understand and use EU integration as a tool to develop and empower their societies and be the main and credible driver of these reforms. On the other hand, however, a recent observation made by Daviddi (2023) warns that the attractive power of the EU in the region is at best weak and possibly even transformable into some sort of Euroscepticism. Indeed, one of the MPs warned that there might be a new anti-EU movement in the foreseeable future driven primarily by increasing frustration, providing Montenegro as an example where broad support for the EU and NATO has turned into broad support for Putin.

External Negative Perceptions of BiH

Overall, there is a widespread belief in an unfavourable external perspective on BiH as a potential source of instability. As one of the MPs noted, the EU's first association with BiH is still the war. Consequently, and given the EU's obsession with stability (Bieber, 2018), the country is seen as something problematic and to be avoided, as can be seen from the following statements:

So, the entire Balkans, not just Bosnia and Herzegovina, is seen as some backward part, some savage tribes … (MP1)

I generally think that, not only the EU but all representatives of the International Community who come to BiH, I think that they come with big prejudices, they say we are stupid, underdeveloped, small … they look at us as an appendix … I think that they see BiH, in every

respect, as an experiment, which is why I do not believe in their good intentions, neither the EU nor any foreigners. (MP3)

I think that they look at us as a country of problems. Listen, it's enough to type Bosnia and Herzegovina and you will get only negative things. The perception of the people who don't know us is that this is something strange, something bad, problematic, and tense. (MP5)

According to another MP, it is not so much that the EU has a negative perception of BiH per se but that, having made the mistake with the premature accession of Bulgaria and Romania, it is simply more cautious about accepting new member states that are not ready when it comes to meeting certain standards. This in an important point, since the current instabilities within the country are rooted primarily in the internal ethno-national divisions, constitutional challenges, weak rule of law, and widespread corruption. Only by addressing these issues comprehensively and inclusively prior to actual accession can BiH's peripheral status change and true and sustainable progress be achieved.

Conclusions

As one of the interviewees stated, BiH's EU integration has ceased to be a 'project of the heart'. Over seven interviews with MPs, we found much less enthusiasm for EU integration than a decade ago and identified several sources of increasingly contesting views of the EU on the part of local political elites. The first pertains to a local understanding that BiH is not truly welcome in the EU, in addition to a belief that the country is perceived as a source of instability and backwardness. Second, the overall impression is that there is nothing that local politicians could do which would ultimately change the stance towards the country and improve its membership perspective. Third, national political elites believe that only geopolitical shifts could speed up the country's integration into the EU and its dynamics. While Serb MPs coming from the ruling coalition appear generally more critical of the EU integration process, negative attitudes towards the EU mostly persist regardless of ethnic group and whether one belongs to the ruling coalition or the opposition. If these findings are truly shared by most politicians, this would mean that EU integration is no longer capable of incentivizing difficult local reforms. Faced with lower credibility and higher adoption costs of reforms, the EU consequently does not

seem to possess the reformative power it once had (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020).

Under these circumstances, the only alternative potentially becomes locally driven demand for reforms, yet this also appears highly unlikely given the current instabilities and divisions within the country, brain drain, and emigration rates. Addressing instabilities and divisions would require comprehensive country-wide reforms and consistent, sustained efforts by all policy-makers. Yet it remains questionable to what extent local political elites are truly motivated to move the country closer to the EU. It is at least plausible that the widespread fatalism and blaming of the EU that we found during the interviews merely serves to mask a lack of local willingness to undertake difficult reforms. While the EU can certainly be blamed for sending mixed signals to BiH, local politicians have rarely been able to compromise and meet all of the conditions set before them. Only if they do and progress towards accession is still not made could they credibly claim that the EU is truly not interested in the country's EU future. Until then, both sides can be blamed for the repeated stalemates.

Aside from the political elites' perceptions, citizens also feel that the EU is not doing enough to support the country (Bargués & Morillas, 2021) when it comes to tackling some of its core issues (Perry, 2018). Greater European commitment towards BiH could reinvigorate some of the lost enthusiasm but would require more than just declarative statements and a more 'normative' approach (Daviddi, 2023). If it is genuinely interested in integrating the Western Balkans, the EU will have to adjust its 'accession toolbox' (Börzel, 2011). Yet the danger is precisely that the very insistence on difficult and identity-sensitive reforms could cause a further backlash against EU integration (Freyburg & Richter, 2010; Subotic, 2011). We find some indication of this during our interviews, particularly with Serb MPs.

The absence of a genuine external commitment to BiH, together with decreasing local enthusiasm for the Europe project, will probably perpetuate the status quo (Bargués & Morillas, 2021). For years, the EU has been willing to tolerate the current stalemate and sacrifice democratic principles if the region remains stable (Bieber, 2018). The ongoing war in Ukraine, however, might change this calculation and potentially shift the dynamics for the BiH context. Uvalić (2019), for instance, has argued that the security and stability of the whole region would be much better promoted through a credible accession process

than through a return to crisis management. At present, however, BiH seems to be stuck in a vicious circle. In the absence of a major crisis, the EU is unlikely to increase its engagement and provide a more credible membership perspective. This, in turn, will only increase local frustration with and alienation from the EU, helping to perpetuate the status quo and possibly leading to more and more anti-European voices. The emergence of openly Eurosceptic parties in the future should also not be excluded, which would create even more troubles for an already troubled periphery.

With regard to the main limitation of our studies, despite repeated attempts, unfortunately no Croat MP (representing the least numerous ethnic group in BiH) agreed to an interview. It would have been interesting to see whether their views on the country's Europeanization differ from those of the two dominant ethnic groups, particularly since almost all Croats in BiH have Croatian citizenship and are thus already citizens of the EU. Finally, although we conducted interviews with important political figures and MPs, it should be noted that authority in BiH mostly flows from the top to the bottom, given the country's relatively high power distance index. Political party leaders are the ones setting the political agenda, which is largely followed by party members and parliamentary representatives.

Notes

1 This view, however, is not without challenges. Richter and Wunsch (2019) argue that over-reliance on conditionality is inadequate in achieving profound democratization unless it is supplemented by stronger local institutions and civil society. According to Vidačak (2021), it is precisely the EU's unclear, inconsistent, and erratic conditionality that have not allowed civil society to play a more transformative role in society. Finally, there are also questions as to whether the European Commission could successfully use conditionality to promote reforms in the Western Balkans, given that it has problems when applying conditionality for its own member states (Jacoby & Hopkin, 2019; Blauberger & Van Hüllen, 2020).

2 It is important to bear in mind that out of its three neighbours – Serbia, Croatia, and Montenegro – BiH has up to today only settled its border with the latter.

3 We touched upon the country's complex constitutional structure earlier in the chapter. In short, it is characterized by high levels of decentralization in the decision-making process, overlapping jurisdictions, and lack of accountability and transparency. As a result, throughout the country's accession process, the EU has at times required that certain functions be centralized, which the RS has seen as an unwarranted affront to its constitutionally guaranteed position.

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Appendix

Table A6.1: Conducted Interviews

Initials	Gender	Parliament	Type of interview	Date of interview	Dura-tion	Name of interviewer
MP1	M	BiH House of Representatives	In person	5 April 2023	31:00	Adnan Muminović
MP2	F	BiH House of Representatives	In person	12 April 2023	33:38	Adnan Muminović
MP3	F	BiH House of Representatives	In person	19 April 2023	33:34	Adnan Muminović
MP4	F	BiH House of Peoples	Skype	13 April 2023	33:16	Adnan Muminović
MP5	M	BiH House of Representatives	In person	19 April 2023	21:57	Adnan Muminović
MP6	M	FBiH House of Representatives	Phone	12 May 2023	23:35	Hatidža Jahić
MP7	M	FBiH House of Representatives	Skype	23 May 2023	24:43	Adnan Muminović