

Country in focus: Bosnia and Herzegovina



THIRTY YEARS ON, THE SAME POLITICS

by Jelena Jovanović, International Affairs Advisor

The outcome of the tenth general election since the end of war – due to take place on 4 October 2026 – remains uncertain, but there could be a change in the governing parties and coalition. A continuation of the current governing configuration is possible, but so is a reshuffle of the coalition partners. One way or another, the HDZ BiH and SNSD are likely to be key actors in the formation of the next state-level government. Regardless of the coalition configuration, however, the elections are unlikely to alter the ethno-nationalist dynamics, clientelism and corruption that continue to dog Bosnia and Herzegovina's politics, and that prevent more rapid EU integration and economic development.

General elections covering all levels of government (above the local) are scheduled to be held in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 4 October 2026. People will go to the polls to choose the Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) Presidency, the President of Republika Srpska, and the state, entity and cantonal parliaments. It will be the tenth general election since the end of the war and will take place 30 years after the first post-war election, held in 1996. Back then, elections carried a certain element of hope and optimism for better days ahead, in terms of both security and economic prospects. This time around, however, there are few expectations that the elections will bring about fundamental political change.

Political system marred by fragmentation and state capture

Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex political system – which emerged from the Dayton peace agreement of 1995 – combines consociational power-sharing at the state level (where any governing majority requires broad cross-ethnic and cross-party support), while at the entity level a comparatively simple majoritarian system is in use. This design was meant to ensure that no constituent people can be outvoted, but it makes change (of almost any kind) difficult: veto power is spread widely, decisions are far easier to block than to take, and the main party of each constituent people remains indispensable, however the vote goes.

Thirty years after the first post-war elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the social narrative continues to be dominated by issues that create division and heap responsibility onto the opposing side. State capture, manifested through clientelism, corruption, political employment, opaque privatisation

processes and the abuse of public resources, gives those parties in power – particularly those with an ethno-nationalist orientation – a substantial advantage in terms of holding onto their position.

The fragmentation of society and the media creates the impression of democratic freedom and pluralism, but the degree of journalists' autonomy and professionalism remains highly questionable. That makes it difficult for the public to be objectively informed and to reach informed decisions.

As many as 62.1% of young people are seriously considering leaving the country, according to a July 2026 survey by the Bosnia and Herzegovina Coalition for Free and Fair Elections 'Pod Lupom'. The main reasons cited are crime and corruption, mentioned by 30.2% of respondents, the poor state of the economy (16.8%) and the unfavourable political situation (14.9%).¹

In such a situation, one cannot expect any real change after the elections. Since 1996 BiH has been trapped in the same loop. The mirage of democracy heaves into view every two years, as the local and general elections alternate, and then vanishes, not to be seen again until the next vote. No wonder, then, that there has hardly been any improvement in democratic standards and very little improvement in living standards, and that the country has been going round and round in circles for 30 years.

New technology and old irregularities

There is, though, one novelty this time: the use of new technology. In the interests of protecting electoral integrity, the EU High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina imposed a decision in 2025 to provide funds from the state budget for the procurement and implementation of new technology in the electoral process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Approximately EUR 60m has been spent on scanners, cameras and other electronic equipment, with the aim of minimising the previously recorded irregularities and abuses in the electoral process. The new technology should prevent illegal voting on behalf of absentee voters, the manipulation or destruction of ballots, and most of the irregularities at polling stations, which have often been identified as the weakest link in the electoral process.

While the new technology is expected to improve the integrity of election day, it cannot prevent irregularities that occur in the run-up to the election. Even before the start of the electoral campaign, 'Pod Lupom' recorded 528 electoral irregularities, most of them involving the abuse of public resources and premature campaigning.²

¹ Coalition 'Pod Lupom', Istraživanje 'Pod Lupom': Nepovjerenje u vlasti raste, dok EU ostaje simbol nade građana, *Pod Lupom*, <https://podlupom.org/press-kutak/vijesti/istrazivanje-pod-lupom-nepovjerenje-u-vlasti-raste-dok-eu-ostaje-simbol-nade-gradjana/>

² <https://podlupom.org/press-kutak/vijesti/pod-lupom-javni-resursi-se-koriste-kao-politicki-kapital-a-sankcije-izostaju/>

The electoral outlook

Of the three seats in the state Presidency, the race for the Bosniak seat is the most competitive, with the incumbent Presidency member Denis Bećirović facing Bakir Izetbegović, president of the Bosniak conservative party, the SDA. Although Bećirović currently holds a slight advantage, the race is wide open. When it comes to the Croat member of the Presidency, Darijana Filipović, the candidate of the conservative Christian-Croat party HDZ BiH, has a significant lead. Željka Cvijanović from the SNSD, a Serbian nationalist party, is the favourite for the Serb seat, as the presence of two other candidates is likely to fragment the opposition vote.

With regard to the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the formation of the Council of Ministers at the state level, current projections suggest that it will not be possible to form a government without the HDZ BiH. It is also highly likely that the SNSD will consolidate its electoral showing, and will continue its cooperation with HDZ BiH, which survived intact throughout the previous mandate. That would position these two parties as central actors in the formation of the new state-level government. A third partner will also be needed. The two main possibilities are the SDA and the so-called Troika (the Social Democratic Party, the People and Justice party and Our Party).

The SDA has consolidated its position in the local governments and cantons where it has held power. Should it secure enough votes, the resulting governing arrangement would largely resemble that of the period 2018-2022. The main test in these elections will be the level of public support for Troika and whether Troika has done enough to persuade voters that it had delivered on the promises that brought it to power in 2022. Despite numerous political crises, Troika – which comprises socialist, conservative and liberal parties – has managed to see out its mandate. If Troika remains a viable coalition partner after the elections, a continuation of the Troika–HDZ–SNSD coalition would largely preserve the current political configuration.

There is conceivably a third outcome: a coalition involving Troika, the HDZ BiH and opposition parties from Republika Srpska (RS). This would require the RS opposition to perform well in the state-level elections and secure enough seats to become a viable coalition partner, while the SNSD would have to miss out on a place in the governing coalition. This could create somewhat more favourable conditions for cooperation on EU-related reforms, although it would not automatically eliminate institutional blockages or the broader ethno-nationalist divisions that shape political competition. It is also the least likely scenario.

Regardless of the outcome, the elections are unlikely to resolve the disagreements and institutional blockages that have paralysed state-level decision making in recent years.

When it comes to the entity of Republika Srpska, the race for President of RS is very tight between SNSD candidate and current RS Prime Minister Savo Minić and SDS candidate Branko Blanuša, who is backed by the majority of the opposition parties. Just how tight the race actually is can be seen from the results of the early presidential election, held in 2025, when the difference between the SNSD candidate and Branko Blanuša was only 2.44 percentage points. Even in the case of winning the presidency, opposition will also have to secure a majority in the National Assembly of Republika Srpska in order to appoint the prime minister.

Of the 113 required EU reforms, not a single one has been implemented

Regardless of the precise election outcome and the coalition configuration, the broader political environment is unlikely to change. The continued tension surrounding the legacy of the war and the ongoing political furore over the former president of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik's political future illustrate just how quickly ethno-nationalist issues could again dominate the political debate. With fragmentation within the opposition, limited prospects for reform and the broader trend among citizens to regard the solution as lying in emigration rather than reform, the chances of significant change appear relatively small.

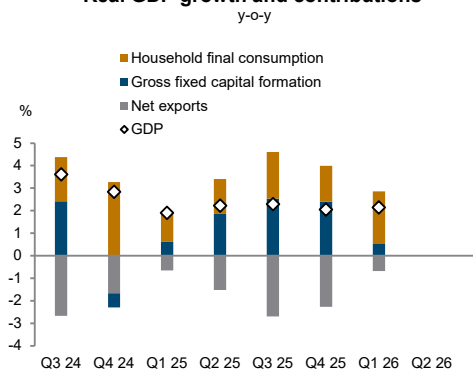
The outlook for Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU integration also remains bleak. Political disagreements continue to prevent the country from completing the remaining steps to formally open accession negotiations. The political establishment in BiH has not even been able to agree on the appointment of a chief negotiator: it is unprecedented for the appointment of the person or institution responsible for conducting negotiations to become an obstacle to the process! This ultimately suggests that there is currently no genuine political will to move further towards EU integration.

The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, under which a significant portion of the financial package is conditional on reforms and is provided either as grants or favourable loans, has not proved sufficiently attractive to Bosnia and Herzegovina's political establishment. The country has not implemented a single one of the 113 reforms it promised, and has not withdrawn a single euro of the nearly EUR 1bn available to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Politicians are letting that money slip away – money that could improve people's lives. That encapsulates perfectly the political and economic story of the country over the past 30 years.

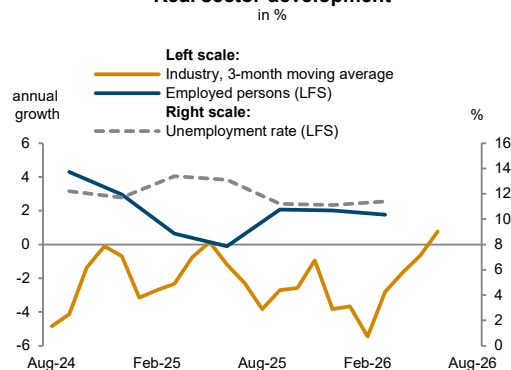
Whatever happens in the elections, the country is likely to remain the slowest-growing economy in the region, with pronounced poverty and social disparities, poor infrastructure and low public investment, declining public services and a majority of young people seeking a better life elsewhere.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Real GDP growth and contributions



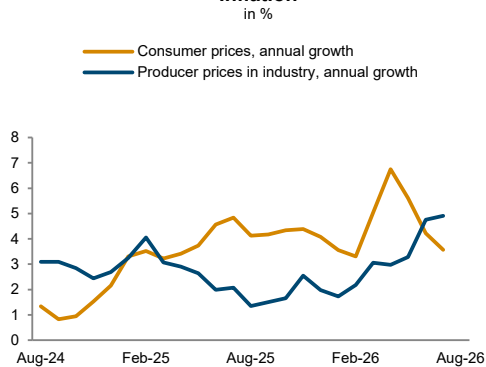
Real sector development



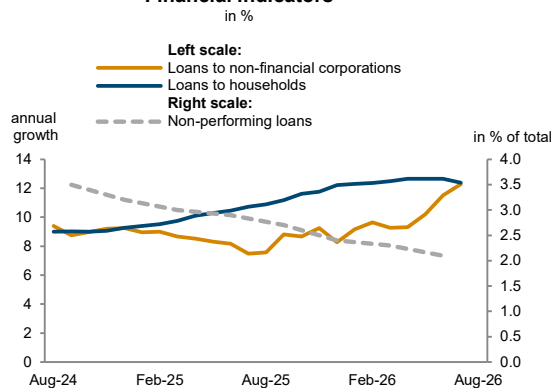
Unit labour costs in industry



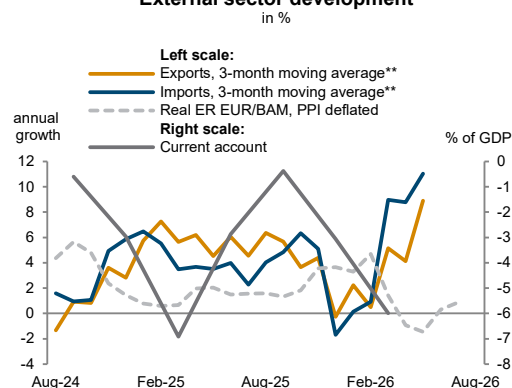
Inflation



Financial indicators



External sector development



*Positive values of the productivity component on the graph reflect decline in productivity and vice versa.

Source: wiiw Monthly Database incorporating Eurostat and national statistics. Baseline data, definitions and methodological breaks in time series are available under: <https://data.wiiw.ac.at/monthly-database.html>