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Pol Bargués & Pol Morillas

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From democratization to fostering resilience: EU intervention and the challenges of building institutions, social trust, and legitimacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Pol Bargués and Pol Morillas
CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs), Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT
Over the past two decades, the European Union (EU) has provided assistance and is unequivocally committed to the European perspective of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The EU strategy has evolved from a top-down approach to democratization and statebuilding in the 2000s towards a more pragmatic approach that seeks to foster resilience. However, BiH still suffers from internal party contestation and political paralysis, socio-economic challenges and areas of limited statehood. Thus, to what extent is the EU enhancing resilience? In this article we answer this question by examining how the EU is contributing to the three sources essential to obtain resilience, as understood by this Special Issue: efficient governance institutions, social trust, and the legitimacy of governance actors. By revising the EU support of BiH and interpreting to what extent it is contributing to these three sources, we conclude that the EU intervention in BiH is resulting in continuity – a process of slow progress that is increasingly perceived as frustrating for the local population – rather than peaceful change.

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Introduction
In the twentieth anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the three-and-a-half years war (1992–1995), the former High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth BiH) (2002–2006) described Dayton as “a superb agreement to end a war, but a very bad agreement to make a state.”¹ The agreement had instituted power-sharing and decentralization mechanisms to maintain peace among Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, yet it prevented the move towards a unified state with a Euro-Atlantic future:

BiH’s constitutional framework (annexed to Dayton) is highly complex and often not conducive to quick, decisive governance. A lack of common will across ethnic groups regularly frustrates political progress and governments and public institutions at all levels have been dogged by accusations of vested interests, corruption and nepotism.²
In 2021, while peace seems stable, the main challenge continues to be overcoming the “order contestation” between parties that is legitimized and reinforced by the complex and decentralized governance structure (that has four tiers [the State, Entity, Canton and municipal levels] and admits ethnic-based veto rights) inherited from Dayton. In turn, internal order contestation in a divided constitutional framework not only cements political paralysis, it also engenders “areas of limited statehood,” areas where state authorities are too weak to govern, or lack coordination, enforcement mechanisms, and legitimacy to take efficient action and address complex socio-economic challenges.3

The situation in BiH, and the Western Balkans, is further complicated and made volatile by the growing order contestation in the region, as the European Union (EU), Russia, Turkey and China try to increase their influence.4 As voiced by the former President of the European Commission (EC), Jean-Claude Juncker, in his 2018 State of the Union Address: “if the EU does not unite and shape the destiny of the Western Balkans, others will step in and do so instead.”5 Over the past two decades, under the Stabilisation and Association process (SAP), the EU has provided assistance and is unequivocally committed to the European perspective of the region.6 Its strategy has gradually evolved from a focus on democratization and statebuilding in the 2000s towards a more pragmatic approach that seeks to foster resilience to its east and south.7 Although some scholars have underlined that little has changed in the EU approach, seeing current policies as still based on a liberal peacebuilding and democratization paradigm of governance “from above,”8 we recognize in a resilience-informed strategy an intention (rhetorically, at least) to include bottom-up sensibilities to strengthen the adaptive capacities of local communities.

The EU has intensified its commitment to the Western Balkans since the Global Strategy and is today the principal investor, trading partner and assistance provider.9 In the light of the coronavirus pandemic, President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has said:

“We have a special responsibility to assist in this pandemic our partners in the Western Balkans, as their future clearly lies in European Union. The EU is mobilising a substantial financial package, confirming the strong solidarity. Together we will overcome this crisis and recover.”10

Yet, officials admit that particularly in BiH significant socio-economic and political improvements are necessary to achieve resilience and ultimately integrate in the EU;11 thereby “the country needs to dedicate considerable efforts to sufficiently fulfil such criteria by strengthening its institutions in order to guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.”12 Thus, to what extent does the EU act as a resilience builder in BiH?

In this article we answer this question by examining how the EU is contributing to the three sources essential to obtain “resilience,” as understood by this Special Issue.13 Resilience is defined here as “the adaptive capacity of societies, communities, and individuals to deal with opportunities and risks in a peaceful manner.”14 The three necessary sources to achieve this ability to peacefully transform and adapt are considered to be: the design of governance institutions that are open, inclusive and produce effective governance; social trust, as the cooperative and respectful interaction among members of a society; and the legitimacy and social acceptance of governance actors by the
people. By revising the EU support of BiH and interpreting to what extent it is contributing to the building of these three sources, we are able to identify the successes and limitations of the EU intervention.

In the conclusion, we tentatively pose that the EU approach to foster resilience in BiH is resulting in continuity, rather than peaceful change and transformation. Continuity means that the situation in BiH does neither deteriorate, nor improve: the country continues “in a precarious struggle between risks and resilience.”\(^{15}\) This is problematic, as the local population are fatigued and frustrated by such a slow progress. This argument is important to studies that have followed the recent developments of the intervention in BiH,\(^{16}\) and more broadly to the literature on resilience and the EU external action, as it critically assesses how interventions to foster resilience – that promise to be different than approaches to state stability and liberal statebuilding – are implemented in practice.\(^{17}\) Although BiH is an enlargement country, and technically falls under the remit of enlargement rather than foreign policy, it is interesting to examine the EU intervention in BiH within the broader shift towards resilience, which should be fostered “in and around Europe,” as the Global Strategy proposes.\(^{18}\)

Methodologically, we build on document analysis of the EU strategy and policies in BiH, as well as on field research observations and interviews. A dozen of interviews were conducted with EU officials in Brussels in May 2019 and in Sarajevo in January 2020. While in BiH, officials from other international and local organizations, intellectuals, and activists were interviewed. A focus group with students from the Political Science and International Relations Department from the University School of Science and Technology was also organized. All data is anonymized.

The article is structured into two sections. The first contextualizes the EU shift towards a resilience-informed foreign policy. The second assesses to what extent this approach is contributing to an efficient institutional design, building social trust, and strengthening the legitimacy of governance actors. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the argument.

**From the democratization paradigm to fostering resilience**

Through much of the 2000s, the EU foreign policy sought to promote liberal democracy abroad. Building on the 1990s consensus that democratic states do not fight each other and indeed contribute to expanding an international zone of peace,\(^{19}\) democratization was closely linked to peace and state-building and focused on enhancing the political, socio-economic and security conditions of states intervened upon. Both the European Security Strategy (2003) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004) built on the assumption that to achieve internal security and enhance its influence internationally the EU had to transform its neighbours – exporting the EU model of good governance and democracy.\(^{20}\)

Democratization and statebuilding interventions became vital to the war-affected countries of the Western Balkans, which suffered from ethnic divisions and nationalist confrontations long after the peace agreements were signed.\(^{21}\) The EU sought to endorse democracy and peace by pushing for good governance and institutional reforms as well as assisting in other informal, socialization mechanisms to help
countries build a vibrant and reconciled civil society. The SAP was launched in June 1999, and revised at the Thessaloniki summit four years later, with the aim to establish a comprehensive process of cooperation to reform all areas of governance and support the European integration of Western Balkan countries. The idea was that the adoption of European norms and institutions through a “EU member statebuilding strategy” would solve the problems in these countries, from ethno-nationalist disputes to organized crime, corruption, dysfunctional market economies and weak rule of law systems.

However, the 2000s ambitious project of transforming and integrating liberal and prosperous states according to Europe’s image was seen as problematic – inefficient and undesirable – towards the end of the decade. In BiH, for example, the approach to democratization, which initially intended to bring free and fair elections, in practice turned into an expensive and intrusive project. This was externally designed and applied in a top-down, regulatory fashion, led by international High Representatives who “set” and “impose[d]” the political agenda and “punish[ed]” those local actors who did not implement it. Commentators denounced the governance model of the EU, which had turned democratization into an indefinite project of supervision and control, annulling the capacity of self-government of the Bosnian people.

Beyond BiH and the Western Balkans, in the context of the Arab uprisings, the EU was perceived to be acting as a “normative empire,” willing to impose norms on other countries. Other authors have also criticized the EU’s efforts of democracy promotion and statebuilding, highlighting, among other pitfalls, the problems of implementing one-size-fits-all programmes or the over-reliance on technocratic mechanisms of regulation. Scholars have also highlighted the tendency of the EU to prioritize security and stability concerns over democratic transitions and bottom-up and localized processes of conflict recovery. These critiques have shown the lack of effectiveness and moral limits of intrusive interventions that, together with the perception of a diverse and unstable neighbourhood and increasing contestation at home, have helped reorienting the EU external action towards resilience-building.

Since 2012 the EU began to use resilience in humanitarian and development policies, although it was not until the Global Strategy that resilience was consolidated as an umbrella term to “navigate this difficult, more connected, contested and complex world.” The world was perceived as complex to Europeans because, internally, the economic and the Schengen crises, as well as the rise of far-right wing parties halted a coherent and ambitious foreign policy, in addition, externally, the violence and fragility of neighbouring countries, as well as a global context of crisis of the liberal order, democracy and multilateralism, consider whether the growing contestation and resistance of EU’s values, norms and policies, made necessary a reconfiguration of interventions. The idea was to promote “state and societal resilience” to the east and south: “The EU will support different paths to resilience, targeting the most acute cases of governmental, economic, societal and climate/energy fragility, as well as develop more effective migration policies for Europe and its partners.”

In these documents, resilience seems to enhance both coherence and a more “pragmatic” way of engaging with challenges abroad. A resilience-informed
approach is understood as a middle ground between, on the one hand, a principled, liberal foreign policy, which seemed difficult to articulate and even generated resistance in the neighbourhood; and, on the other hand, a realist foreign policy driven by interests and geostrategic calculations, which appears too far from European values and purposes.\textsuperscript{37} This pragmatic way of combining both principles and interests is meant to overcome some of the shortcomings of top-down “liberal” approaches to democratization and statebuilding.\textsuperscript{38}

Firstly, approaches to foster resilience discard externally driven operations and the top-down implementation of policies. Instead, resilience-building consists on a process to foster societal adaptation and support locally-owned institutional reforms, where responsibilities are shared between international and local actors.\textsuperscript{39} The intention is to foster societal transformation from “below,” by building cooperation among different groups, and strengthening the legitimacy of governance actors.\textsuperscript{40} Critical scholars, however, have highlighted that this is resilience at its best, while often the implementation of resilience policies is dominated by top-down methods or hidden security agendas that arrest the potential of resilience.\textsuperscript{41}

Secondly, the EU has adopted a realistic approach for managing (not solving or settling) crises and disputes. The EU does not live in the illusion and hubris that it has the power to determine the fates of states and societies in its surrounding regions. The political, security, social, economic, environmental, digital, and energy challenges these countries face are often so great that no external actor, beginning with the EU, has the power to fix.\textsuperscript{42}

This “humility” forces approaches to resilience to accept that crises and conflicts can only be managed temporarily and contingently, but they tend to persist, reoccur and rarely disappear. Korosteleva and Flockhart put it this way:

The best that can be hoped for is that the worst consequences of the on-going change can be anticipated and mitigated and that governance structures can be reformed and adapted to allow them to meet the challenges and risks that inevitably will occur.\textsuperscript{43}

There is a deep uncertainty throughout the process of responding to risks and recovering from a crisis, including the uncertainty that new, unexpected risks and crises may occur. The idea that there is no solution to risks or no return to “normality” has transformed external action to one that is sustained across time and requires constant flexibility and adaptation: “resilience [does] not imply adapting and bouncing back to the previous state in the aftermath of a shock. A state and society will and should be inherently different after a crisis occurs.”\textsuperscript{44} The EU’s Strategic Approach to Resilience “recognizes the need to move away from crisis containment to a more structural, long-term, non-linear approach to vulnerabilities, with an emphasis on anticipation, prevention and preparedness.”\textsuperscript{45}

In short, the idea of resilience enables the EU to project locally-owned and sustained processes of intervention, that are intended to correct top-down statebuilding interventions more common in the 2000s (see Figure 1). The difference between the two approaches is probably less clear-cut than it is presented here. But the shift from statebuilding to resilience helps to capture a tentative direction – underpinned by a widespread concern to evolve, learn and improve the EU external action. In turn, it is imperative to ask: what are the outputs of implementation strategies of resilience?
Redesigning institutions, and fostering trust and legitimacy in BiH

In the second part of the article, we explore how the EU is intervening in BiH and contributing to the three sources that are deemed essential to build resilience, according to this Special Issue, and identify the limitations and pending challenges. The first is the design of open, inclusive, fair and transparent (state and non-state) governance institutions to produce effective governance. As it will be argued, the main obstacle here is the local authorities’ lack of commitment to undertaking governance reforms, even though they must own and be responsible for them. The second source to resilience is fostering social trust and inclusive social identities, to ensure dialogue, cooperation and positive interactions between different groups. This aim is difficult to achieve because the main parties are unwilling to cooperate, and local people perceive multi-ethnicity as a foreign and artificial objective. The third source to resilience is the legitimacy of governance actors, which is linked to the perception that people have on how governors are responding to their needs and preferences, while delivering effective and inclusive governance. A crucial limitation here is that the process of joining the EU has stagnated. People perceive BiH’s integration is no longer a EU priority, thus becoming suspicious of governance objectives. All these limitations impede that resilience thrives, and thus the outcome of the EU intervention in BiH is resulting in continuity: it prevents that governance breakdown or violence reoccur and fosters adaptation to emergencies. Yet final end-states such as BiH’s integration to the EU are ever receding.

Design of governance institutions: who leads the way?

The EC Indicative Strategy Paper for BiH for the period 2014–2020, revised in 2018, states that the institutional structure is dysfunctional and represents the key obstacle to produce effective governance.

Bosnia and Herzegovina features a highly decentralised structure with multiple levels of governance and facing a lack of functional coordination and policy-making mechanisms and processes. The fragmented planning and budgeting processes, the lack of clear accountability lines and oversight mechanisms, and the lack of a clear division of competences and responsibilities continues to undermine the efficiency and effectiveness of public administration as a whole.
As part of the Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance II, the strategy for BiH is meant to provide intensive support of institutional reforms related to public administration, macro-economic and fiscal policies, rule of law and fundamental rights. The purpose, for example, is to help to consolidate an “independent, effective, efficient and professional judicial system” and improve legal frameworks, ensure protection to minorities and vulnerable groups, and develop anti-corruption and anti-discrimination policies. The underlying assumption is that “open, inclusive, fair and transparent” institutions are a key resource to strengthen the resilience of societies.

Importantly, while the aim of institutional reform to make the country viable and efficient has arguably been the cornerstone of EU intervention since the early 2000s, the EC strategy for BiH is increasingly prepared, revised and implemented in partnership with government authorities, and consulted with civil society organizations. It puts a premium on “ownership,” as BiH needs to own and lead the design and reform of governance institutions. While the idea of ownership has been used in EU documents in BiH and elsewhere since the early 2000s, there is the firm willingness to “enhance ownership” and enable “local resilience capacities” in crisis management and enlargement processes, as “international assistance should not be a substitute for local responsibility and political action.” Through an increased emphasis on ownership in the reform of governance institutions, the EU steps away from top-down statebuilding interventions, which were designed according to ideal methods of governance, and echoes theoretical understandings of resilience.

However, there seems to be constant limitations: there is both a lack of domestic political compromise as well as the belief that Brussels cannot lead the institutional redesign process, which needs to be locally owned. Officials of the EU delegation in BiH justify the lack of progress in enhancing ownership and advancing reforms by pointing to the uncompromising domestic political elites, who are unwilling to undertake the required reforms and reach collaboration agreements with other parties. Official documents have also traditionally underlined the problem of domestic resistance: “the main risk to the reform of the public sector is the lack of political will and agreement among political leaders to pursue the necessary reforms.” The “old” dilemma of local ownership reappears at its finest: “ownership of the reform process is an indispensable pre-condition for success,” but should local stakeholders own the process when they are unwilling and even boycott advances for peace?

There seem to be two competing ways to respond to the ownership dilemma. On the one hand, some EU officials argue for a return to the top-down, liberal statebuilding model of the early 2000s, when an institutional design to produce effective governance was dictated from the outside. Because the status quo benefits certain elites, the argument goes, “nothing has really changed” since the mid 2000s, when foreign powers began to use less intrusive means. Thus, influential policymakers like Christopher Bennett, former Communications Director and the Deputy High Representative at the Office of the High Representative in BiH, desire a restoration of foreign command:

The vested interests of the country’s ethno-national elites in the current system are too great. They are its primary beneficiaries and will block reforms that undermine their control over society. The impetus for change must come from without … The international community will therefore have to take the lead and to manage the process.

While this option is tempting to some “old-school” policymakers, it is generally recognized to be unrealistic and outmoded.
On the other hand, other officials (as well as most (critical) academics) argue that the heavy-footprint and externally-led approach that some call for is no longer an option in a resilience-informed intervention.\textsuperscript{62} Not only the EU and its member states are reluctant to adopt a more hands-on role in the design of governance institutions in BiH, this line of reasoning suggests that external forms of imposition are most of the times inefficient, as well as politically and economically costly, and morally untenable.\textsuperscript{63} Instead, the idea is to work towards real ownership, so that the redesign of institutions is led by representative and willing local stakeholders. This is an option that is critical of the way in which the EU has engaged with civil society actors up until known (often superficially and predominantly partnering with civil society groups that preserve the status quo); instead, it demands greater participation to enable bottom-up processes.\textsuperscript{64} While this view of fostering institutional redesign from below is shared by some EU policymakers, it is not yet translating in practice and requires a long-time horizon, as well as the chance to strengthen other factors of resilience.

**Building social trust: a technical and foreign illusion?**

Building social trust among individuals and communities is an important source to foster resilience and has been key to overcome the ethnic divisions in post-conflict BiH. As a study by the UNDP in the late 2000s reported, “the country’s social fabric is still weakened and frayed. Levels of social trust are very low.”\textsuperscript{65} While the situation has improved and the risk of large-scale violence or inter-ethnic war resurgence is admittedly low, a key concern by civil society and international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) continues to be how to promote an inclusive society that protects minorities, and (re)build ties in a socially segregated society, where people still live in separate ethno-territorial spaces. The OSCE, for example, has provided support for initiatives that fight for an inclusive education system, challenging the policy of “two schools under one roof” that segregated students based on their ethnicity.\textsuperscript{66} The UNDP has promoted “Dialogue Platforms” (2018–2019) to fund activities that strengthen social cohesion and facilitate a formal space of interaction, “enabling civil society, citizens and government partners to jointly identify, promote and implement dialogue and trust building activities.”\textsuperscript{67} The EU partners and works closely with these organizations, and contributes to building social trust by developing the socio-economic level (“competitiveness and growth” is pillar II of the strategy for BiH). Social trust is thus fostered indirectly by contributing to the developing of multiple sectors and subsectors. For example, IPA II supports programmes to enhance an “inclusive education,” “develop and implement active labour market measures” to reduce unemployment, and “support a countrywide harmonized and standardized needs-based approach for the social protection system.”\textsuperscript{68} Social trust is thus not pursued narrowly, by focusing only on inter-ethnic dialogues and relations – for example, in line with the EU Gender Action Plan 2016–2020, it also considers the different needs of women and men, and gender mainstreaming informs all phases of the programme cycle of IPA II. In sum, it is a whole-of-society approach that sustains long-term multi-stakeholder partnerships, including civil society and local communities, and is meant to create a conducive environment for social development within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.\textsuperscript{69}
The EU pursues the goal of building social trust also through connecting BiH to neighbouring states, as can be seen in the Berlin Process initiative that aims at boosting cooperation among Western Balkans states. The idea is that trust is fostered through building connectivity and socio-economic integration, “connecting infrastructures, economies and people.” The “connectivity agenda” seeks to finance the construction of key transport and energy links in the region (such as the bridge between BiH and Croatia over the river Sava or the “Peace highway” between Serbia, Kosovo and Albania), that will in turn create jobs, boost trade, enhance cooperation and ease mobility in the region.

The socio-economic fabric in BiH is also developed when the EU helps address emergency situations that may arise from natural disasters or pandemics like the coronavirus. For example, through EU ProLocal, the EU supports small and medium companies and local producers to enhance their competitiveness in the face of disasters, by helping them to be resilient to floods and landslides. The programme also helps build on societal resilience by creating new jobs and developing tourism in places such as the Blidinje Nature Park. In response to Covid-19, the Head of the Delegation of the EU and EU Special Representative in BiH, Ambassador Johann Sattler, granted €7 million to BiH for medical equipment and affected businesses.

However, while the EU and other organizations have been able to sustain social wellbeing and a peaceful environment (conflict is not an immediate threat), inter-ethnic relations are still relatively minimal and the level of mistrust among people remains high. “The political environment is not yet conducive to reconciliation and to overcoming the legacies of the past,” has observed the EC. In the strategy for BiH, the EU highlights that the main burden for social trust is again the strong disagreement between political leaders, topped with the “lack of effective cooperation and coordination among involved ministries and agencies at all levels.” Thus, the EU highlights that “all actors need to demonstrate full cooperation” to improve the social and political situation: “[BiH] needs to step up the protection of fundamental rights of all citizens, including by ensuring an enabling environment for civil society and reconciliation and the protection and inclusion of vulnerable groups.”

At the same time, academic studies have also argued that the aim of building a vibrant multi-ethnic society is perceived by local people as an objective that is foreign and artificial, one that disregards the complex political preferences on the ground that are not mobilized around ethnic groups. Although in recent years the EU is wary of imposing external views and has adopted a more indirect approach to build social trust than in the post-war years, the approach is still seen as highly technical, bureaucratic, and paternalistic. This approach, scholars continue, favours liberal and cosmopolitan values over particular, everyday concerns; and stability and technocracy over political disagreement and public engagement. The social level is emptied of a democratic process and filled instead with party patronage and clientelist networks.

In consequence, the externally supervised process to build (horizontal) social trust has not only had limited effects in bridging a segregated society; it has also fuelled (vertical) distrust in institutions and governance actors. As Chandler observed already in 2006: “The artificial institutional settlement in Bosnia, where the international community assumes executive and legislative powers, makes the development of trust impossible as this process lacks transparency or accountability.” Today, students are less preoccupied by the residual inter-ethnic conflict than by unemployment or
the gap between themselves and elected representatives and international diplomats.\textsuperscript{82} This lack of trust in authorities erodes the third source of resilience: the legitimacy of governance actors.

**Building legitimacy of governance actors: too slow to be credible?**

The third source of resilience, the legitimacy of governance actors, is low in BiH (the lowest in the Balkan region), as only 20\% of the people admit to trust or totally trust the Parliament and government, and an overwhelming majority do not trust the judiciary, the media, the ombudsman either, because these institutions are not independent of political influence, according to the 2020 Balkan Barometer.\textsuperscript{83} This low social acceptance is connected in part to the high perceptions of corruption across the institutional landscape, but also importantly to how people perceive the efficiency and ability of governance actors to address their needs and wants satisfactorily.\textsuperscript{84} Both the 2020 Balkan Barometer and a 2019 public opinion poll by the National Democratic Institute (NDC) from the United States revealed that the main two concerns of the people in BiH are “unemployment” and the “economic situation,” while the outflow of Bosnians attracted to opportunities to work and live abroad became an increasingly important preoccupation.\textsuperscript{85}

Because public institutions do not deliver on welfare responsibilities, citizens have to rely on social connections and networks for job opportunities and access to basic services. A corrosive dynamic thus comes full circle to erode the confidence in governance actors: the incapacity of governance institutions is remedied in society through patronage, clientelism and personal connections, which in turn damage further institutional functioning and legitimacy.\textsuperscript{86} Indeed, the poor performance of institutions in the country caused anti-government riots and grassroots citizen mobilization protests in 2014, and yet few changes have occurred since then.\textsuperscript{87} According to the Balkan Barometer 2020, 67\% of Bosnian respondents are still dissatisfied with the economy, the highest percentage among Western Balkan countries.\textsuperscript{88} According to the NDC poll of 2019, 87\% of citizens stated that the country is moving on the “wrong direction” and only 15\% responded “better” to the question “do you expect that next year your life and the lives of your family members will be better, worse or the same as today?” For most people, hope lies in a promised European future: the majority of Bosnians support EU accession (Bosniaks 88\%, Serbs 54\% and Croats 75\%), in part because 63\% of Bosnians believe that the economy will then improve.\textsuperscript{89}

Few in BiH would be surprised by these pessimistic numbers. A generalized perception among people in the country is that the EU is not doing enough to improve the economy, while others believe more critically that the EU neoliberal model to incentivise the privatization of state-owned enterprises has contributed to the crisis.\textsuperscript{90} Critics suggest that EU preferences for liberalization, as well as conditionality and membership, have benefited economic and political elites and contributed to a “state capture trap,” which erodes democratization and the legitimacy of institutions.\textsuperscript{91} In our field research, we also noticed a widening gap between the expectations of the people – who wish to improve their socio-economic situation and join the EU – and the EU call for postponing BiH’s integration, which results in the erosion of the legitimacy of governance actors.\textsuperscript{92}

In May 2019, considering BiH’s application for EU membership, the EC opined that BiH “does not yet sufficiently fulfil the criteria related to the stability of institutions
guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. In the past years, the EU has intensified its support, always confirming the European perspective of the country, yet insisting, at the same time, that there are many challenges lying ahead.

As seen above, the consensus is that the lack of political will and disagreements between the main parties, stimulated by a fragmented and inefficient political structure established in Dayton, halt the process of European integration. Yet, the EU has also adopted a stricter approach to enlargement, as the strategy for BiH attests:

the accession process today is more rigorous and comprehensive than in the past, not only due to the evolution of EU policies but also due to lessons learned from the previous enlargements.

One of these lessons is that since it is difficult to compel states to do institutional changes once they are EU members, states must consolidate reforms before accessing the Union. Due to internal contestation, the rise of Euro-sceptic political forces and a growing uncertainty in the neighbourhood, the EU appears more cautious in its strategy. Rather than leading a swift state- and membership building project, the EU’s approach is to back up a long-term and gradual process of institutional reform and social development. As a report by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung suggests, “the EU’s priority is to work on its own ‘fitness’, and to give the countries of the Western Balkans time to do their homework.”

Officials of the EU delegation in BiH also admit that although there is no time to lose in the reform process, there are few time constraints: “Enlargement is indifferent to the speed; they will join when they are ready, when the conditions to do so are met.” Indeed, a delay of the entry point is even seen as positive for future members: “it is true that the accession process today is more demanding than in the past. But this is because the process has been made more rigorous to help the countries tackle the more difficult challenges they face in their reform efforts.” However, the state of “liminality” – neither inside Europe, nor outside, in a “permanently unfinished” process – frustrates the hopes of the people to improve their situation and to perceive governance objectives as legitimate.

Bosnian people perceive that enlargement is no the longer the foremost priority of the EU. Rather, it is to support BiH in managing migration flows by third country nationals trying to reach Europe. The legitimacy of the European project in BiH wanes, as the process of accession seems secondary and impossible to achieve: “regardless of how much effort they make, they are not getting closer to joining the EU even by 2030.” For instance, 33% of Bosnians believe that the country will never access the EU. Field research also noticed a high degree of local disaffection with the EU supervision process. While all the students interviewed agreed that they would like the country to be part of the EU, they highlighted that the process was “slow” and felt “disappointed” about the lack of progress: “the situation is frozen”; “neither the elites nor the EU are interested in improving the situation”; our “future is in Berlin, rather than Sarajevo” were some of the claims made by the students.

While they pointed to the unwillingness of political parties and elites for breaking the institutional deadlock, they also criticized the EU for a lack of interest and commitment to the present and future of BiH. In the past years, EU leaders have intensified the rhetoric of commitment towards accession to build on trust and mutual confidence, and nevertheless its legitimacy has continued to decline as the process stagnates.
Conclusion: continuity and fatigue in BiH

In this article, we have analysed the EU approach to foster resilience in BiH by examining how it is contributing to the reform of governance institutions, as well as nurturing social trust, and strengthening the legitimacy of governance actors. This approach is meant to be locally driven and continued, sustained across time, as a means to correct the more ambitious, externally-led, quick-fix and intrusive statebuilding projects of the early 2000s. However, we have identified a number of pending challenges:

First, the process of fixing institutions to produce effective governance is stalled because of the deep-seated party contestation that has not been overcome; but also because the EU is unwilling to lead the process. Thus, the approach to build resilience in BiH is so far unable to resolve the dilemma of local ownership that has haunted international interventions in the past decade (some local actors who should act as leaders do not want to do the necessary changes, while international actors who want the reforms cannot impose them).  

Second, the EU has put a premium on developing BiH socio-economically to improve on social trust and sustain peaceful relations. While progress has been made, important social indicators such as the level of reconciliation and the protection of minority groups are still deficient. In part, this is due to the lack of coordination and cooperation between parties. Also, the project of social development – building a vibrant multi-ethnic society – is seen as an objective that is foreign and artificial, one that is estranged from the people’s everyday concerns (Figure 2).

Figure 2. By the authors.
Third, the EU process of assistance is welcomed by the people and enhances the legitimacy of governance institutions and yet, at the same time, it is perceived as too slow and exciting local disaffection, especially among young people. They perceive that political leaders embrace the status quo, while the priority of the EU is managing the emergency situation of migrants crossing BiH to enter EU countries.

Thus, the current approach seems to be leading towards “continuity,” rather than “peaceful change” and “transformation” in BiH.109 There is still a long way for the country to achieve resilience and join the EU. This is problematic to the extent that the current approach is generating fatigue and frustration among the local population, who do not see a prosperous future for their country and many consider migrating elsewhere. However, continuity is not seen as problematic by EU officials, who favour stability and gradual adaptability to crises over structural changes. “We are here to stay,” to ensure that reforms, democracy and governance advance “steadily,” admitted an EU official.110 That is, the current process of monitoring and supervision seems geared towards avoiding that risks turn into greater threats in BiH or preventing institutional breakdown. The EU helps BiH to stay afloat, while adjourning the European perspective of the country.

Notes
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11. Interviews with official from the United Nations, Sarajevo, 09/01, and two EU delegation officials, Political Section, Sarajevo, 09/01/2020. See also, Keil and Perry, “Introduction: Bosnia and Herzegovina.”
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29. Dandashly, “EU Democracy Promotion”; Börzel, Dandashly, and Risse, “Responses to the ‘Arabellions’.”
33. Flockhart, “Is This the End?”
37. Wagner and Anholt, “Resilience as EU Leitmotif.”
38. Chandler, Resilience.
41. Ejdus and Juncos, “Reclaiming the Local.”
42. Tocci, “Resilience,” 186.
44. Tocci, “Resilience,” 181.
45. EC and HR/VP, “Strategic Approach to Resilience”; Bressan and Bergmaier, “From Conflict Early Warning.”
48. Ibid., 12–14.
51. EC, “Annex to the Commission.”
52. Belloni, “Civil Society and Peacebuilding.”
55. Interviews with two EU delegation officials from Political section, Sarajevo, 09/01/2020, and one from Cooperation section, Sarajevo, 10/01/2020.
56. EC, “Annex to the Commission,” 22. Indeed, in the Indicative Strategy Paper, the lack of will, cooperation and agreement among political leaders appear to be the main risks obtruding into all sectors, from rule of law and fundamental rights to education and social policies.
57. Ibid., 11.
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110. Interview with EU delegation official, Political Section, Sarajevo, 09/01/2020.

**Notes on contributors**

Pol Bargués is Research Fellow at CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs) in Spain, working on a Horizon 2020 project on EU’s external action (EU-LISTCO). He obtained his PhD with the University of Westminster (UK) in 2014. He has developed an interest in the intersection of philosophy and international relations. His work explores debates on international interventions and critically interrogates perspectives on resilience, hybridity and social critique. He is co-editor of Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding and has published in numerous international relations.
journals such as Review of International Studies, Global Society, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, Third World Quarterly, among others.

**Pol Morillas** is Director of CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs). He is a political scientist, holds a PhD in Politics, Policies and International Relations from the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona (UAB) and a master’s in International Relations from the London School of Economics. He has taught at several universities, including the UAB, Blanquerna and ESADE. His numerous published research papers for academic journals and think tanks, like his opinion articles, cover the dynamics of European integration, the institutional developments of EU external action, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the EU’s security strategies and Euro-Mediterranean relations, among other subjects. His latest book is *Strategy-Making in the EU. From Foreign and Security Policy to External Action* published by Palgrave Macmillan (2018).

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**ORCID**

Pol Bargués  [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9555-1934](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9555-1934)

Pol Morillas  [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8489-0914](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8489-0914)

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