

POLICY BRIEF

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Building and Sustaining Cooperation Across Divisions in Bosnia and Herzegovina

How cooperation works in practice, where it loses
force, and where institutions have room to act

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This policy paper draws on fieldwork carried out in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the United States between June and August 2026, comprising 23 key informant interviews and 11 focus groups and roundtables with participants from the Armed Forces, business, academia, civil society and the U.S.-based diaspora, together with European Union officials working on the Bosnia and Herzegovina accession portfolio. We also reviewed 118 scholarly, policy and official sources to assess evidence on cooperation and institutional change in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It follows the 2025 policy brief *Everyday Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Findings from Sarajevo and East Sarajevo*, prepared by the same partnership.

The research brings diaspora perspectives directly into the analysis and provides empirical evidence of cooperation that is often less visible than political conflict in public and media accounts. The analysis identifies recurring forms of cooperation and the institutional conditions that underlie them; it does not assess their prevalence nationally or compare the prevalence of cooperation across sectors. Views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of Yale University, the Institute for Development Impact, or any institution that supported the research.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cooperation across political and ethnonational divisions is more common in Bosnia and Herzegovina than political and public discourse might suggest. Our research examined how this cooperation works in practice, drawing on interviews, focus groups and roundtables with participants in the military, business, academia, civil society, and diaspora sectors, as well as with European Union officials working on the Bosnia and Herzegovina EU accession portfolio.

Cooperative arrangements worked best when participants had a clear reason to rely on one another and sufficient authority and institutional support to carry the work forward. The Armed Forces provide the clearest case: personnel from different parts of the country work within a single institution, with a common mission, chain of command, and professional standards. Elsewhere, cooperation often connected people and organizations that remained institutionally separate and lacked common authority.

Cooperation could produce substantial results, yet fail to translate into institutional action. The reasons were identifiable. We found three distinct points where cooperation could lose force: when political backing changed; when the next decision lay with another institution; and when funding or institutional knowledge was lost.

International support helped institutions complete technical and administrative work, but had less influence when political agreement over authority was required. The EU accession process showed this limit: even substantially larger financial incentives under the Growth Plan did not remove the need for agreement among the institutions and political leaders responsible for implementation.

Because these limits can be identified in advance, we offer five recommendations for strengthening and sustaining cooperation.

FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Leverage broad public support to create room for reform.** Public agreement is far stronger on how institutions should perform than on how political power should be organized. Use it to make professional criteria, documented decisions and verifiable rules concrete.
2. **Map decision processes and identify where existing authority ends.** Establish at the outset which body holds each required decision, and whether it can be built into the work from the start.
3. **Establish handoffs between institutions.** For each dependency, agree what the receiving institution needs, who provides it and when, and resolve incompatible procedures before they interrupt implementation.
4. **Sustain cooperation through early transfers of responsibility and knowledge.** Transfer responsibility, relationships and recurring finance to a successor before external support ends or experienced people leave.
5. **Establish a durable public counterpart for diaspora engagement.** Create a standing function, at the level the issue requires, that can connect diaspora expertise and investment with institutions able to use them.

COOPERATION ACROSS POLITICAL AND ETHNONATIONAL DIVISIONS

Cooperation is more common in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) than its political institutions and public discourse often suggest. People routinely work, trade, research, organize and solve problems with others despite divisions that remain highly salient in the country's politics. Our research examined how this cooperation works in practice. We documented the practical arrangements through which people and institutions work toward a shared result, coordinate responsibilities, exchange knowledge or resources, and maintain professional, commercial or civic relationships. These arrangements may be formal or informal, temporary or sustained, and can persist even where those involved disagree politically or hold very different views on Bosnia and Herzegovina's past, present and future.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is often described as having a fragmented institutional system. The Dayton Peace Agreement ended the war in 1995 and distributed authority among the state, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), Republika Srpska (RS), Brčko District and, within the Federation, ten cantons, while embedding power-sharing arrangements

intended to protect the three constituent peoples and prevent domination by any one political group. Responsibility for many public decisions consequently remains divided among institutions with different mandates, budgets and political constituencies. Ethnonational divisions also remain highly salient in parliamentary politics and political discourse (Mochtak and Muharemović 2024).

Thirty years later, this distribution of authority continues to shape what can be decided, by whom and at which level. Cooperation may work well among the people and organizations directly involved, while the next step still requires approval, financing, legislation or political agreement elsewhere. Cooperation reaches a critical point when the next step depends on an institution outside the working relationship and those already involved no longer determine whether the work can continue.

Public attitudes show a similar distinction between how authority is organized and how institutions are expected to perform. In 2026, the CONSENT BiH survey found substantial differences of opinion among Bosniaks, Croats, Serbs, and Others over territory, sovereignty, representation, and international supervision. Views were much closer on judicial independence, professional public administration, equal rights, and institutional integrity, with judicial independence ranking ahead of every

other constitutional question tested (Glaudić et al. 2026). The sharper divisions concern who should hold political authority and how it should be organized. Expectations of how public institutions should exercise that authority are much more widely shared.

Our research examined how this cooperation works in practice, drawing on fieldwork conducted between June and August 2026 with participants from the military, business, academia, civil society and the U.S.-based BiH diaspora, as well as EU officials working on the Bosnia and Herzegovina accession portfolio. The analysis examines how cooperation works in each setting, identifies where it loses force, and considers where institutions have room to act.

colleagues depend directly on one another. For example, mine clearance was described as work where personnel “need to understand each other” because their safety depends on the judgment of the person beside them. Repeated practice has made cooperation part of ordinary military work even where ethnic and political differences remain. Participants noted, however, that this experience differed by generation: some senior personnel shared professional experience dating back to Yugoslavia, while younger personnel had grown up in a more ethnically divided post-war environment.

“We are working through floods together. Nobody knows who is who – Bosnian, Serbian, Croat, doesn’t matter. They went there and just put themselves in danger too.”

HOW COOPERATION WORKS IN PRACTICE

Armed Forces

Cooperation across divisions is routine within the Armed Forces of BiH. Personnel from different parts of the country work within a single institution, with a common mission, chain of command and professional standards.

Military participants described successful cooperation in mine clearance, flood response, firefighting and other operational work where

The institutional foundations of this cooperation become clearer when the Armed Forces are compared with efforts to reform policing (Box 1). Training and operations remain under military command, giving commanders authority to assign personnel, set tasks and enforce standards. However, decisions on senior appointments and major expenditures are made through political institutions; disputes can remain unresolved, even as units continue to train and operate together. Once a mission depends on one of those decisions, commanders cannot make senior appointments or release the funds themselves.

BOX 1

Armed Forces And Police: Why Institutional Cooperation Developed Differently

Efforts to reform the Armed Forces and the police in BiH required political agreement over how powers held by the Entities would be distributed, but they produced very different institutional outcomes. The 2005 defence reform created a single operational chain of command for the Armed Forces, while leaving senior appointments and major resources with political institutions. Police restructuring required more extensive redistribution of authority: legislative and budgetary control over policing would move to the state level, and police regions would be drawn across Entity lines. Entity institutions would have had to relinquish powers they already exercised over police organization and finance. Agreement on those changes remained contested, negotiations stalled, and progress toward conclusion of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union was delayed (Koneska 2016).

The common military command structure gave personnel an established framework within which cooperation could develop. Police reform, by contrast, required political institutions to agree on a new distribution of legislative and budgetary authority where no comparable structure existed. Practitioners expected to work within the proposed system could coordinate professionally, but they had no authority or existing structure within which they could decide which institutions would control policing or its financing.

Business

The firms represented in this study described commercial relationships shaped primarily by price, quality, technical standards and the ability to deliver. Participants described companies in Sarajevo and Banja Luka forming consortia when one firm had expertise the other needed to complete the work. That interdependence created a direct commercial reason to cooperate regardless of the political relationship between their jurisdictions. Firms could negotiate the terms, observe performance, and choose another partner if the arrangement failed.

“My professional experience has taught me that cooperation becomes surprisingly easy when people have a serious project in front of them. When you are developing a product for an international client, working against a deadline, or trying to solve any technical problem, nobody around the table has time to ask who belongs to which ethnic or political group.”

Firms had less control when commercial activity depended on government decisions. A firm could choose its supplier or business partner, but could not choose the authority issuing a permit, conducting an inspection, or administering a tender. Participants described procurement procedures in which companies met the stated technical requirements only to encounter new conditions after the process was under way. Firms were more willing to invest, deepen relationships and compete for work when requirements were applied consistently and decisions turned on performance rather than political access. The Southern Interconnection, a planned gas pipeline linking BiH to Croatia to diversify its gas supply, illustrates the problem at a larger scale: implementation still depends on a sequence of government decisions.

“I think public procurement is the main problem for all of us, no matter which industry we represent. ... If you have some political connections ... it doesn't matter which institution it is, they will find a way to protect you.”

Academia

Cooperation in the academic sector operated

at two levels: between individual researchers and between their institutions. Researchers from different universities collaborated on joint studies, curricula, doctoral training, and publications. Much of this work succeeded because the academics themselves controlled what they had agreed to deliver.

That autonomy had limits. Hiring and advancement could turn on political or ethnic considerations, while economic insecurity and possible professional repercussions affected which topics academics pursued and how openly they entered politically sensitive debates. Those pressures did not prevent academics from maintaining professional relationships or completing joint work, but narrowed what they were willing to pursue publicly and what their institutions were prepared to support. Participants noted that political conflict received far more media attention than cooperative academic work. They could produce evidence and recommendations, but did not control whether responsible institutions acted on them.

“We had professors from Mostar, from Sarajevo, from Banja Luka. But the major problem is that cooperation stayed within that narrow academia circle. It didn't reach the public in a degree that maybe it should have...”

Participants saw some potential for these constraints to ease over time, describing younger academics as less constrained by divisions that had previously marked academic life. International projects and agreements between universities created specific opportunities for collaboration. Whether these relationships endured, however, depended on universities continuing to support them once external funding ended.

Civil society

Civic organizations offered a different setting in which cooperation could develop over time. The same people had repeated opportunities to work together and build ongoing relationships. In one long-running school initiative, students initially separated by ethnicity were, years later, visiting one another for religious holidays and participating together in activities that had once been difficult to organize. Because the organization returned to the same schools over

many years and worked with students, teachers, and parents, the relationships had time to develop beyond the activities that first brought people together.

Whether such programs could continue depended on education authorities and school leadership. Participants described one case in which an education official helped sustain cross-community activities through changes in political leadership, and others where approval from one administrative level could still be blocked by another. Civic organizations could build relationships and develop programs, but could not decide whether schools would continue hosting them.

In Brčko, the District Government, a civic organization, and UNDP worked together to establish a network of 26 youth clubs, with the civic organization training the youth workers who staffed them. All 26 clubs later took part in an annual Festival of Youth Work. Participants traced this work to the later creation of the Brčko Law on Local Communities, which formalized citizen participation in local governance. Because the District had assumed responsibility while the work was being developed, the initiative had a route into regular practice.

“That really worked because of political willingness to work with civil society.”

Funding and succession also affected whether civic cooperation endured. When donor priorities changed and no alternative financing was available, organizations often stopped their work. A long-running peacebuilding initiative declined after the death of the person who had connected its members, while experienced practitioners worried that younger colleagues were not inheriting the relationships and practical knowledge built over many years. The relationships often survived, but the funding, institutional access and practical knowledge needed to continue the work did not.

Diaspora

The diaspora is large relative to the country’s resident population: an estimated 2.2 million people of BiH origin live abroad, compared with

about 3.1 million residents in BiH (Ministry of Security 2025; World Bank 2026).

Among the U.S.-based diaspora, cross-community relationships often grew out of ordinary social and professional life, including sports, cultural activities, student groups and professional associations. These relationships brought together people from BiH and the Western Balkans whose political views or ethnic identifications did not necessarily align, often without discussion of the war, history or current politics. For some participants, religious institutions were important centers of community life; because religious affiliation often corresponded with ethnic identification, a mosque or church could also serve as an important marker of community belonging. Cultural, student and professional organizations offered other points of connection, including the Bosnian American Professionals Association and the Bosnian-Herzegovinian American Academy of Arts and Sciences, where participation rested on shared language or professional and educational interests.

“The Bosnian language school [in the United States] at one point had more students from Croatia and Serbia than from Bosnia. ... The school taught the children the language, little poems, and how to read and write. There was no religion there. ... I think we did leave a mark here in uniting the communities.”

Diaspora engagement also moved knowledge, professional opportunities, and capital between people and institutions in the United States and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This included mentoring, links between schools and universities, exchanges, professional advice, and investment in businesses that created employment. Much of this activity began through personal relationships and initiative rather than an established channel between diaspora actors and BiH institutions.

“Our role is not only to send money back ... We have the opportunity to invest in Bosnia. For example, I have my own business and I employ five people in Sarajevo. ... We have a smart and technologically capable workforce that’s working

remotely. ... I don't think we are fully tapping into that potential."

While diaspora participants can create connections, provide expertise or capital and organize exchanges, the decisions needed to carry that work forward are made in BiH. When an investor provides financing, for example, permits and other approvals still depend on the relevant authorities within the country. Whether a diaspora initiative outlasts the person who started it depends, as in the other sectors examined here, on an institution in BiH assuming responsibility for it.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT AND DOMESTIC IMPLEMENTATION

In March 2024, the European Council decided to open EU accession negotiations with BiH. By August 2026 those negotiations had still not formally begun: the Council had yet to

adopt the negotiating framework, and the first intergovernmental conference depended on two steps the European Commission had identified, namely the adoption of judicial reform laws aligned with European standards and the appointment of a chief negotiator (European Council 2026). Requirements set at European level must be implemented by domestic institutions with separate legal responsibilities. Some can be met within existing mandates; others require political agreement over authority.

The Europol contact-point negotiations stand as an example of how that can be managed. Police bodies at different levels needed a mechanism for exchanging information with Europol while retaining their existing responsibilities and control over data. Even the description of a contact point as either joint, national or single carried political significance. The National/Joint Contact Point established in 2023 gave the participating police bodies a common mechanism for information exchange without changing the underlying distribution of competences (Bosnia and Herzegovina Ministry of Security 2023). The EU Growth Plan shows the same constraint under much greater financial pressure (Box 2).

BOX 2

EU Support Can Incentivize Cooperation, But Domestic Agreement Still Determines Implementation

The EU Growth Plan has made the financial cost of delay much larger. Bosnia and Herzegovina's approved Reform Agenda provides for almost €1 billion in performance-based support, with disbursement tied to the implementation of agreed reforms (European Commission 2025). By June 2026, the President of the European Council said that €108 million had already been lost and that further funds were at risk because required steps remained incomplete (European Council 2026).

Earlier EU processes show why a larger financial incentive is only part of the equation. Visa liberalization required Bosnia and Herzegovina to meet 174 conditions, including the introduction of biometric passports. Most could be completed by institutions exercising authority they already held, allowing visa-free travel to begin in December 2010. The Sejdić-Finci ruling of the European Court of Human Rights required something different. Implementing the 2009 judgment meant changing constitutional rules governing eligibility for the Presidency and House of Peoples, and political agreement on those changes was not reached. The Growth Plan now puts this difference between implementation within existing authority and reforms requiring political agreement under much greater financial pressure.

EU accession officials linked the prospects for cooperation to the predictability of the accession process. They pointed to the movement from fourteen key priorities to eight steps and then to a smaller set of requirements, as well as long delays elsewhere in the region, as signals that weakened confidence that compliance would produce the political outcome being offered. Formal accession negotiations were seen as important because they would place institutional and rule-of-law questions within a continuing process with agreed procedures and milestones, rather than requiring a new political bargain around each issue.

The unresolved appointment of a chief negotiator to lead Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession process highlights a serious domestic coordination problem. The chief negotiator would oversee the accession process across ministries and levels of government, with the capacity and institutional memory to track reforms and connect decisions that depend on one another. Individual ministries can continue working on their own files, but the accession process still requires a function that can hold the sequence together. EU officials described technical exercises, expert advice and clarification of compliant options as most useful

when they helped the responsible institutions work through those decisions, while leaving the choice and implementation with domestic authorities.

COMPARING THE INSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF COOPERATION

Cooperation became more durable when the people involved had enough authority and institutional support to carry the work forward. This included clear responsibility for decisions, reliable rules, and some protection against changes in leadership, funding or political backing. Where one of these conditions depended on another institution, cooperation could still produce substantial results, but whether it advanced or endured depended on decisions made elsewhere.

Some forms of cooperation also became visible well beyond the institutions and people directly involved. Major sporting events provide two examples (Box 3).

BOX 3

When Cooperation Becomes Publicly Visible: Youth Sport And National Football

The 2019 European Youth Olympic Festival made cooperation between Sarajevo and East Sarajevo visible well beyond the institutions organizing it. The two cities coordinated across separate municipal authorities to host an event that people could attend, follow, and identify with despite the political divisions more often associated with their relationship (Olympic Committee of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2019).

Bosnia and Herzegovina's 2026 World Cup squad brought together players from the country and its large diaspora, including several who had grown up and built their careers abroad before choosing to represent the country. Playing as one national team, they qualified through the play-offs and reached the round of 32 (FIFA 2026). The run drew in a community far larger than the country itself: the BiH Football Federation reported ticket demand for the knockout stage well beyond its allocation, while Bosnians and Herzegovinians abroad organized large supporter gatherings in the host cities.

These highly visible examples sit alongside less visible forms of cooperation sustained through institutional arrangements. Figure 1 compares how much institutional support was built into each form of cooperation and where it still depended on another actor or institution. The shading summarizes the evidence used in this study and does not measure the prevalence of cooperation or rank sectors against one

another. The last column shows how securely cooperation could continue when leadership, political pressure or institutional priorities changed. The middle shade indicates that some protection existed, but remained dependent on political backing, external support or discretionary approval and could therefore be weakened or withdrawn.

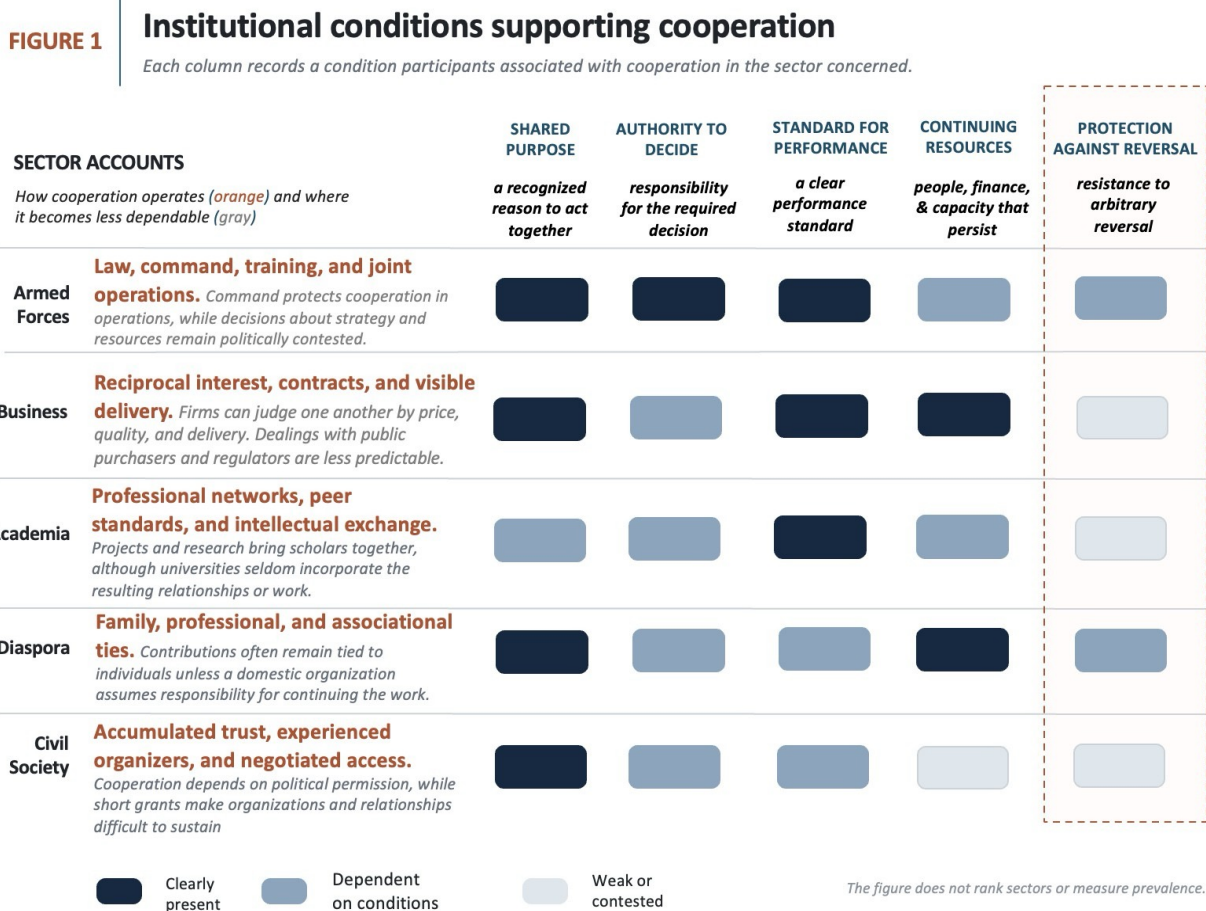


Figure 1. Institutional conditions supporting cooperation, by sector. Source: authors' analysis of interviews, focus groups and roundtables, June–August 2026.

WHERE COOPERATION LOSES FORCE

Even where cooperation has emerged, the question remains whether it can be sustained. Changes in political backing, the transfer of decision-making to another institution, or the loss of funding and institutional knowledge can each weaken cooperation. Three points at which cooperation can lose force recur regardless of sector; Figure 2 summarizes them.

1. When political backing changes

Institutions can withdraw authorization, endorsement, or protection from work they had previously supported even when the people involved remain willing to continue. A change in leadership, greater public visibility or a shift in the political meaning attached to an issue can make the same activity harder to support.

Academic and civic participants described institutions becoming less willing to give access, associate themselves publicly with an activity or continue supporting it once it became politically sensitive. Professional relationships could survive that retreat, but the

work produced was then less likely to influence institutional decisions or extend beyond those already involved. Association with a recognized international process sometimes made such work easier to defend. Once that backing ended, domestic leaders had to decide whether to continue supporting the work.

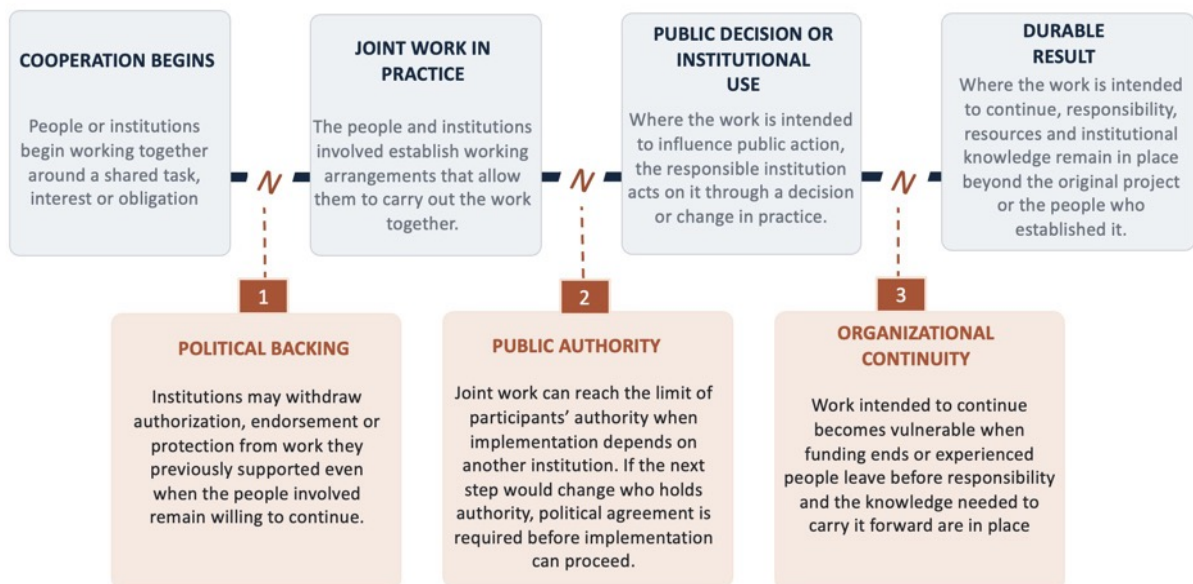
2. When an institution outside the cooperating partners controls the next decision

Substantial agreement and technical preparation can be in place while implementation still depends on a decision by another public body. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, that may be the point at which an initiative reaches an approval, appointment, legal change or funding decision that the institutions doing the work are not authorized to make.

Where the responsible institution can act through powers it already has, progress then depends on securing a decision and connecting the institution to the rest of the process. Where implementation would change which institution controls that decision, reform also requires agreement on the distribution of authority.

FIGURE 2 Three points where cooperation can lose force

This figure shows where those conditions come under pressure as work develops.



Performance standards shape joint work. Reversal protection is tested at each pressure point.

Figure 2. Three points where cooperation can lose force. Source: authors' analysis of interviews, focus groups and roundtables, June–August 2026.

3. When funding or institutional knowledge is lost

Some cooperation continued because a project financed the work or because a small number of experienced people knew how to maintain the relationships and institutional access on which it depended. When the funding ended or those people left, the activity often contracted because the staff time, recurring costs and institutional knowledge needed to continue had not been transferred.

Civic participants were particularly concerned about what happened when experienced practitioners left. Younger colleagues could take over the same position without the relationships, institutional knowledge, or judgment their predecessors had built over many years. That experience had to be handed over while both people were still involved, through introductions and time spent working together, rather than assumed to follow from a new job title. Where a project was intended to become a continuing public function, the handover also had to include responsibility for the work and a realistic source of recurring finance before external support ended.

The same pattern held beyond civil society. Professional and educational initiatives, including those begun by the diaspora, were in a better position to be sustained when a firm, university, or public institution in BiH was willing to support them. Where that responsibility remained with the individual who had initiated the relationship, the activity was more likely to end when that person stepped away.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of these constraints can be identified from the outset of a program. The recommendations that follow focus on where there is room to act.

1. Leverage broad public support to create room for reform

Judicial independence, professional public administration, equal rights, and institutional integrity have support across political and group divisions. Public agreement is much stronger on how institutions should perform than on how political power should be organized. Where a proposed change concerns how an institution already carries out its responsibilities, that support can be made concrete in the rules the institution follows. A change to public recruitment, for example, can specify professional criteria, require the selection decision to be documented and make it possible to see whether those criteria were applied. Changes to representation or to which institution holds a particular power require agreement from the people and institutions authorized to make those decisions. Broad public support can help secure that agreement.

2. Map decision processes and identify where existing authority ends

Work can be technically sound and agreed by everyone involved, yet still stop because implementation requires a decision that none of the participating institutions can make. Mapping those decisions means identifying which body already has decision-making authority and whether that decision can be built into the work from the outset. This may involve regulatory approval, an authoritative appointment, an executive decision, a change in the law, or a funding decision. If implementation would require changing which institution holds that authority, political agreement is needed before it can proceed.

3. Establish handoffs between institutions

Many public functions in Bosnia and Herzegovina depend on institutions in different jurisdictions completing interdependent parts

of the work. One institution may be unable to proceed until another provides information, issues an approval, or takes an action. For each handoff, establish what the receiving institution needs, who must provide it, and when it is required. Agree how information and decisions will pass between institutions, and address incompatible procedures before they interrupt implementation. These arrangements should operate through existing mandates where possible; any new mandate, joint structure or redistribution of authority requires the relevant institutional or political agreement.

4. Sustain cooperation through early transfers of responsibility and knowledge

Projects expected to continue after external support ends require an early transfer of responsibility. Where a successor organization is expected to continue the work, it needs time to test whether it can do so with its own staff and resources before external support ends. This reveals problems while there is still time to address them. Where cooperation depends on relationships built by particular people, succession needs to begin before those people leave. Those taking over need time to work alongside them and establish relationships with the relevant people and institutions. A new title or formal responsibility does not by itself transfer relationships that took years to build.

5. Establish a durable public counterpart for diaspora engagement

Diaspora engagement needs a durable public counterpart or coordination function that can maintain relationships and connect expertise and investment with institutions able to use them. Its location should follow the issue and the authority required: it may sit at municipal, cantonal, Entity, or state level, or involve several levels working together. The function should also sustain government-to-government and subnational relationships with countries, states, regions, and municipalities where large BiH communities are established. This would give cooperation continuity beyond individual contacts and one-off initiatives.

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