Elections in the last quarter of 2006 and the formation of a new national government in February 2007 gave hope that Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), after twelve years under international administration, would assume governing responsibilities and continue along the process of integration into the European Union. Relying on this progress and the generally stable environment in BiH, then–High Representative Christian Schwarz-Schilling intended to hand over most of the governing powers to local politicians by the end of June 2007, effectively closing his office and ending its authority over the majority of BiH institutions.

Despite these promising signs earlier in the year, 2007 was characterized by a general lack of progress in BiH, in both its internal and its external dimensions. As the year drew to a close, the international community remained heavily engaged in the day-to-day management of the country, ethnic matters still dominated and froze BiH political discourse, and a new High Representative was appointed with an eye toward potentially closing the office in 2008. And while the EU was able to cut its military peacekeeping presence in the country, from roughly 6,000 to about 2,500 troops, the lack of political progress signaled a continued international political presence, rather than a phasing down.

More than a decade after the end of the conflict, Bosnia remains host to a peacekeeping architecture that evolved out of the 1995 Dayton Accords. Originally intended to be a short-lived international presence, the late 1990s saw the entrenchment of the roles of NATO’s Stabilization Force (SFOR), the UN’s International Police Task Force (IPTF), an Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission, and the ad hoc Office of the High Representative in maintaining post-conflict stability. The European Union has since taken on the bulk of security responsibilities, with the EU Police Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUPM) replacing the IPTF in January 2003, and a military mission (the EU Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina [EUFOR Althea]) taking over from SFOR in December 2004. These transitions took place during the tenure of Lord Paddy Ashdown as High Representative. Appointed in 2002, he was also “double-hatted” as the EU’s Special Representative. He took a highly assertive approach to his mandate and intervened in domestic politics, dismissing a number of elected politicians.

On 31 January 2006, Christian Schwarz-Schilling succeeded Ashdown as High Representative. While Schwarz-Schilling promised to maintain an emphasis on EU accession, he pledged to do so with less intervention than his predecessor. The adoption of this less assertive approach failed to achieve the intended outcome of a transfer of responsibilities to local Bosnian authorities, and served to further underscore ethnic polarization. Consequently, the anticipated handover did not materialize.
Schwarz-Schilling was replaced by Miroslav Lajčák in July 2007. Prospects for Bosnia’s accession to the EU were temporarily dashed in October 2007 when, after a year of Serb and Croatian-Bosniak political disagreement on police reforms within the EU’s standards and deadline, the Stabilization and Association Agreement—an EU preaccession treaty—was postponed. EU standards require that all legislative and budgetary matters for police be vested at the state rather than the local level, and that technical criteria rather than ethnic divisions determine areas of police operations. Upon the failure of BiH to meet the EU’s police reform deadline, and in a dramatic policy shift, High Representative Lajčák announced that his office would move its focus away from accession to the EU, toward economic reforms, as the deadlock on police reform was indicative of EU accession not being a priority for the local authorities, leaving BiH as the only former Yugoslav state without a pre-EU membership agreement.

The announcement of Lajčák’s reforms highlighted the growing political crisis in Bosnia but also brought about some political compromise. The measures, aimed at improving the functioning of BiH government and avoiding ethnically driven stalemates, were seen as overly intrusive and elicited widespread protests in the streets and the resignation of Prime Minister Nicola Spiric in November 2007. As the year came to a close, however, a breakthrough was made on police reforms, and Lajčák’s reforms were accepted. Even with EU accession back on track, many still expressed concern over the political situation and its lack of progress.

By late 2005, the EUPM, originally mandated in 2003 to assist in the reformation of BiH police and support capacity building, had seen progress on its work with Serb and Bosnian-Croat politicians who agreed to the principle of a unified force. However, over the course of the next two years, hard-line stances emerged, and implementation of police reform stalled. As of October 2007, the EUPM maintained only 167 international personnel in BiH, and its mandate was due to expire at the end of the year.

In response to the relatively calm security situation in BiH, EUFOR Althea continued its draw down. At the start of 2007, the force numbered approximately 6,000 troops and EU governments had reportedly considered reducing it to 1,500. However, the force was reduced only to 2,500 troops in 2007, to ensure it would have the capacity to perform its twofold mandate: providing security in BiH as its priority, and serving as a rapid reaction force in the region.
reinforcement to NATO’s KFOR in nearby Kosovo. This mandate was renewed by the UN Security Council for another year in November 2007. EU troops continued to cooperate with US forces, commanded by a residual NATO headquarters in Sarajevo, in their ongoing operations to capture war crimes suspects. A number of these suspects have been brought to justice, but notorious former Bosnian Serb leaders Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić are still on the loose. Meanwhile, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia continued its work, and in February 2007 acquitted Serbia of genocide in Bosnia but found that it had violated the Genocide Convention with respect to the Srebrenica massacre.

A “normal” functioning Bosnian state looks no closer at the end of 2007 than it did at the start of the year, and this holds serious implications for the international community’s engagements there. While the demand for international security assistance has been halved, the stalemate on police reform, the inefficiencies of the BiH governing structures, and other related issues highlight the need to promote enhanced political engagements toward a unified Bosnia.