

2024-2025 Bi-Annual Report

Prepared By :

Andrea Pozderac
Adnan Hadrović

Technical Support:

Amel Osmanović

1834 Connecticut Ave NW, Washington DC 20009
<https://mdbih-council.org/>
mbhec@i4di.org

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About Us

The Maryland-Bosnia and Herzegovina Exchange Council (MBHEC) was established in November 2023 to formalize and expand civilian cooperation between the State of Maryland and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Its creation marked the twentieth anniversary of the Maryland–Bosnia and Herzegovina State Partnership Program, which since 2003 has linked the Maryland National Guard with Bosnian counterparts through defense and civil-military collaboration.

While that partnership has long served as a foundation for mutual trust, its focus remained primarily on security cooperation. The establishment of MBHEC responded to a shared recognition by leaders in both governments that the partnership’s next stage required a sustained civilian dimension. The Council was therefore designed as a coordinating platform to connect Maryland and Bosnia and Herzegovina through education, culture, commerce, public administration, and community engagement.

MBHEC operates as a bridge between institutions and communities. It facilitates exchanges among universities, local governments, private sector actors, and diaspora networks, translating strategic cooperation into practical initiatives that can benefit citizens on both sides of the Atlantic.



MBHEC at the Celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Maryland-Bosnia and Herzegovina State Partnership Program (SPP) with MD Secretary of State Susan C. Lee and the SPP Leadership

Our Purpose

The MBHEC's purpose is to strengthen the long-standing partnership between Maryland and Bosnia and Herzegovina by advancing civilian cooperation in education, culture, innovation, and local governance. It operates as a civic platform that complements, but does not replicate, the work of the State Partnership Program. MBHEC aims to translate institutional relationships into sustained professional exchange and practical outcomes that benefit communities in both settings.

Our Mission

MBHEC's work is guided by three operating principles:

1

Partnership as legacy & complementarity: Builds on two decades of state and defense cooperation, extending that into the civilian sphere, and aligns with Maryland's international strategy while retaining an independent civic mandate.

2

Exchange as institutional capacity: Strengthens universities, local governments, and professional networks through programs, technical cooperation, and shared research, with measurable results in knowledge transfer, policy innovation, and service delivery.

3

Community as point of connection: All initiatives are grounded in local institutions and responsive to community priorities. Engagement is reciprocal, emphasizing partnerships that create educational, cultural, or economic value for Maryland and Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Our Team

Since its inception, MBHEC’s mission has been driven by a hands-on, cross-disciplinary team of scholars, policy experts, and development practitioners. Our team has designed and delivered civic and cultural initiatives, policy dialogue, and opportunities for business and the arts between Maryland and Bosnia and Herzegovina, grounded in practical collaboration and long-standing relationships.



Azra K. Nurkić, PhD
Co-Founder



Emir N. Kačapor, PhD
Co-Founder



Adnan Hadrović, M.Sc.
Co-Founder



Andrea Pozderac, M.A.
Senior Program Analyst



Sofia Sebastian, PhD
Senior Policy Advisor



Defne Sarsilmaz, PhD
International Partnerships
Advisor



Mak Nurkić
Program Officer



Mia Bakal, M.A.
Research Assistant



Evan Daneker
2025 Summer Intern

Reflecting on our work

In 2024 and 2025, MBHEC translated its mission into tangible action, building bridges across communities, governments, and cultural institutions. From forging new partnerships and amplifying cultural exchange to empowering youth and advancing academic collaboration, our efforts reflected both breadth and depth. The highlights below capture the momentum we've created and the foundation we've laid for even greater impact in the years ahead.

Institutional Engagement and Recognition

MBHEC gained formal recognition as the coordinating platform for civilian cooperation within the Maryland–Bosnia and Herzegovina partnership. In collaboration with the Maryland Secretary of State's Office, the Embassy of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Washington, and the Maryland National Guard's State Partnership Program leadership, the Council positioned itself as a reliable interlocutor between civic and government actors.

Early in 2024, MBHEC helped catalyze a series of high-level exchanges that laid the groundwork for expanding cooperation beyond the long-standing military partnership. Building on the 2023 agreement between Minister of Defense Zukan Helez and Maryland counterparts to extend collaboration into civilian spheres, MBHEC supported the development of a framework to guide cooperation in the fields of economy, education, health, culture, and technology.

This effort was reinforced through our formal presentation of the Civil Cooperation Platform to the Maryland National Guard and the State Partnership Program Directorate, which marked a milestone in recognizing the vital role of non-military engagement.



The Minister of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Zukan Helez, hosted MBHEC co-founders

In coordination with the Embassy of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Washington, MBHEC also facilitated the visit of BiH Minister of Communications and Transport Edin Forto to Annapolis, where he met with Maryland Deputy Secretary of State Michael Lore.



Michael W. Lore, Deputy Secretary of State of Maryland, and Edin Forto, Minister of Communications and Transport of BiH

The meeting underscored the mutual commitment to strengthening ties in transport, innovation, entrepreneurship, and education, while honoring the historic foundation of Maryland’s democratic legacy. Minister Forto’s subsequent visit to MBHEC and the Institute for Development Impact deepened this dialogue, affirming the importance of connecting new generations of U.S. citizens of Bosnian origin to transatlantic cooperation.

This coordination elevated dialogue between state and national counterparts and helped translate Maryland’s long-standing defense partnership into broader institutional cooperation. It culminated in the state delegation meetings of July 8, 2024, when Maryland’s Secretary of State, H.E. Susan Lee, met with Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Elmedin Konaković, to reaffirm shared priorities and advance the next phase of partnership between the two governments.



State delegation visit between Maryland’s Secretary of State, H.E. Susan Lee, and Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Elmedin Konaković

Culture and Public Diplomacy

Cultural cooperation is one of the most visible dimensions of MBHEC’s work during this period. MBHEC helped establish the Sister City partnership between Annapolis and Sarajevo, formalized as a framework for sustained collaboration in culture, education, and local development. The partnership reflects a commitment by both cities to strengthen civic and economic ties through direct exchange. Early discussions have already identified new opportunities for expanding this model, with Ocean City and Neum under consideration as future sister cities.



Sarajevo Welcomes Maryland Delegation for its 30th Film Festival

MBHEC also facilitated collaboration between the Sarajevo Film Festival and the Annapolis Film Festival, connecting two creative communities for the first time. The joint programming showcased films that explored shared human experiences and diverse perspectives, attracting more than ten thousand attendees across events. The partnership opened a channel for future artistic cooperation, including co-curated screenings and professional exchanges between filmmakers and cultural institutions.

Beyond these flagship initiatives, MBHEC strengthened ties with partners such as the Marshall Legacy Institute to support mine action and youth education programs. Our engagement has directly supported the training of 20 mine-detection dogs and raised awareness about the importance of educational programs in post-conflict zones.



MBHEC at Marshall Legacy Institute’s 2024 Clearing the Path Gala

These efforts reflected a broader understanding of culture not only as artistic expression but also as a means of sustaining dialogue, memory, and civic responsibility between Maryland and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

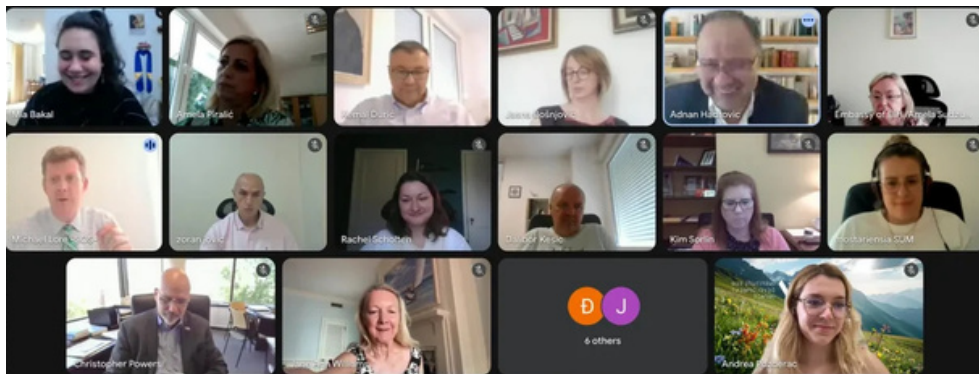
Higher Education Collaboration

Education remained a central focus during 2024 and 2025. On April 26, 2024, MBHEC participated in *Maryland’s International Education Day* celebrations, promoting educational advancement and cross-cultural understanding to bring higher education stakeholders into the broader Maryland–Bosnia and Herzegovina conversation and raised the profile of academic cooperation.



MBHEC at Maryland’s International Education Day 2024

Building on that momentum, on June 4, 2025, together with the Maryland Secretary of State’s Office, the Maryland International Education Consortium, and the Embassy of Bosnia and Herzegovina, MBHEC convened a virtual meeting of university leaders to explore a prospective U.S.–Bosnia and Herzegovina higher education partnership.



Launch of the U.S.-Bosnia and Herzegovina Higher Education Partnership

The discussion scoped priorities for student mobility, joint teaching, collaborative research, and possible joint or dual-degree arrangements. It identified working contacts and areas of alignment. This was an exploratory coordination meeting, not a formal launch. Following that dialogue, partners began outlining practical next steps. Early work has focused on mapping program compatibility, sketching exchange formats, and reviewing potential funding channels. Taken together, these efforts shifted academic engagement from isolated contacts toward a more organized path for sustained cooperation.

Community and Diaspora Engagement

MBHEC worked to strengthen the role of the Bosnia and Herzegovina diaspora in Maryland’s civic and economic life. We supported young professionals and students by facilitating internships, mentorship programs, and leadership development workshops. Our participation at the *BiH Diasporic Conference* in Boston further strengthened diaspora connections and cultural growth. These activities reinforced the understanding that diaspora engagement is a practical mechanism for sustaining long-term exchange.



MBHEC at BiH Diasporic Conference



MBHEC with Michael Lore, Maryland Deputy Secretary of State, and Brigadier General Amy Kremser, Deputy Commander of the Maryland National Guard

The State of Maryland continued to demonstrate its commitment to international engagement and BiH, with Governor Wes Moore issuing two important proclamations. **Recognizing March 1 as Bosnian-American Day** pays tribute to the historic significance of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s declaration of independence on March 1, 1992, while highlighting the strong and enduring partnership between Maryland and BiH.

Gov. Moore also officially recognized **July 11 as Srebrenica Genocide Remembrance Day**, honoring Bosnian-American contributions and reaffirming Maryland’s commitment to democracy, human rights, and peace. On behalf of MBHEC, Emir Nurkić Kačapor presented the original proclamation to Fazila Efendić, president of the Mothers of Srebrenica Association, during the 20th International Youth Work Camp in Potočari.



MBHEC Presentation of Maryland’s Proclamation on Srebrenica to Mothers of Srebrenica Association

Policy Dialogue and Future Cooperation

Beyond program implementation, MBHEC facilitated a closed-door roundtable discussion *Dayton 2.0: Launching the Dialogue for Bosnia & Herzegovina's Future* together with the Institute for Development Impact. The event brought diplomats, academics, policy experts, and civil-society representatives together to examine governance challenges and discuss forward-looking reforms in BiH.

In parallel, the Building Peace Across Generations study, conducted by I4DI in collaboration with the Yale Jackson School of Global Affairs, connected Maryland-based research networks with institutions in Sarajevo and Mostar. The study examined intergenerational perspectives on everyday peace in post-conflict societies and will inform policy discussions at the Dayton Peace Agreement anniversary conference in 2025.



Field work in Mostar, Yale Professor Catherine Panter-Brick (fifth from L) and Yale College student and MBHEC Program Officer Mak Nurkić Kačapor (far R) led a focus group for local adults.

Strengthening Bilateral Ties

Throughout 2024, MBHEC hosted delegations from Bosnia and Herzegovina to discuss economic collaboration, tourism development, and cultural exchange. On October 23, 2024, officials from Maryland and Bosnia and Herzegovina convened in Annapolis to advance



Maryland and Bosnia and Herzegovina Strengthen Cooperation Across Education, Military, and Economic Sectors

cooperation across disaster management, education, defense partnerships, and economic initiatives. These bilateral dialogues reflected a more integrated approach to partnership, connecting civilian and institutional priorities under a shared framework.

Regular quarterly meetings with Maryland and Bosnia and Herzegovina officials provided a mechanism for reviewing progress and setting new priorities. Together, these engagements reinforced the role of MBHEC as a coordinating hub and demonstrated the growing coherence of the Maryland–Bosnia and Herzegovina partnership across government, academia, and civil society.



MBHEC with Maryland Deputy Secretary of State, State Partnership Program leadership, and BiH Embassy and Defense Attaché representatives



Looking to the Future

As we prepare for the rest of 2025 and step into 2026, MBHEC is dedicated to expanding our impact and fostering deeper connections between Maryland and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As the partnership continues to mature in scope and institutional strength, MBHEC’s role will shift from establishing new initiatives toward embedding those already underway within stable frameworks that link public institutions, universities, and communities on both sides. Our key goals for the coming year include:

1 Consolidation of Existing Partnerships

The Sister City partnership between Annapolis and Sarajevo will continue to facilitate and guide cultural and municipal collaboration, with early planning for a joint delegation visit in 2026. Discussions with Ocean City and Neum will assess the feasibility of extending this model to coastal cooperation and shared tourism promotion. The education partnerships initiated in 2025 will be refined into practical exchange modules, emphasizing co-teaching, research linkages, and reciprocal student mobility.

2 Advancing Dialogue and Knowledge Exchange

Building on the 2025 Dayton 2.0 and Building Peace Across Generations dialogues, MBHEC will support a set of follow-up discussions on democratic governance, youth engagement, and local economic development. These activities will serve as a bridge between Maryland’s academic institutions, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s reform agencies, and international partners interested in practical cooperation frameworks.

3 Economic and Innovation Cooperation

Preparations are underway for the EU–Eastern U.S. Circularity Forum, to be co-hosted in 2025 with the EU Delegation. The Forum will highlight investment and innovation opportunities in circular manufacturing, recycling, and green services. The event will use compact “deal-room” sessions to help companies identify project leads and partnerships.

4 Strengthening Community Linkages

MBHEC plans to convene Bosnia and Herzegovina Days in Maryland during spring 2026, bringing municipal leaders, educators, and business representatives together with their Maryland counterparts for site visits and thematic roundtables. The event will focus on practical cooperation in tourism, manufacturing, healthcare, and emergency management. It will also serve as a visible platform for diaspora engagement and community outreach.

5 Knowledge and Policy Engagement

Following its collaboration with the Yale Jackson School and I4DI, MBHEC will continue to link research and policy dialogue through academic seminars and public lectures. Planned activities include a Yale-hosted event on the Western Balkans in February 2026 and contributions to the 30 Years Since Dayton conference later in the year. These forums will anchor Maryland’s connection to ongoing peacebuilding and governance discussions.

6 Institutional Sustainability

MBHEC’s long-term success depends on predictable coordination and resource continuity. The Council will formalize a light-touch monitoring framework to track results, prepare a consolidated annual plan, and secure multi-year support commitments from public and private partners. These steps are intended to keep the partnership efficient, transparent, and aligned with Maryland’s broader international engagement objectives.



A Note of Gratitude

Dear Friends of the Maryland-Bosnia and Herzegovina partnership,

On behalf of the Maryland Bosnia and Herzegovina Exchange Council (MBHEC) co-founders, team, and volunteers, we invite you to join us in advancing our shared mission: strengthening non-military cooperation between Maryland and Bosnia and Herzegovina through education, culture, and economic exchange. Founded in 2023 at the joint encouragement of Maryland's military and civilian leadership, MBHEC focuses on practical, people-to-people initiatives - linking universities and researchers, elevating cultural collaboration, engaging the diaspora, and building bridges between public institutions and the private sector.

None of this would have been possible without the unwavering support of our co-founders, the Institute for Development Impact (I4DI), volunteers, and community partners. Your dedication inspires us to keep building bridges and creating meaningful opportunities for both communities. Thank you to everyone who believes in the power of connection and the importance of preserving cultural heritage.

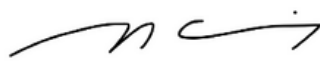
As we wrap up 2025 and step into 2026, we're excited about the opportunities ahead and look forward to another year of progress, partnership, and celebration. We invite you to support MBHEC through sponsorships, program partnerships, mentorship and hosting opportunities, or a financial contribution, so we can deepen this work and widen its impact.

Here's to an inspiring and impactful year ahead!

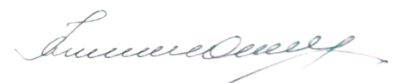
With sincere gratitude,



Azra Kačapor Nurkić, PhD



Emir Nurkić Kačapor, PhD



Adnan Hadrović, M.Sc.

MBHEC Co-Founders

