




Hiring Foreign Nationals in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Practical Guide

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A close-up photograph of a person's hands using a blue-handled stamp on a document. The stamp is rectangular and has a blue handle. The person is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt. The background is blurred, showing a desk with papers and a pen.

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Hiring foreign workers has shifted from an occasional corporate need to a mainstream labor-market response in Bosnia and Herzegovina (“B&H”), especially in construction, hospitality and manufacturing. In 2025, 6,702 valid work permits have been issued in B&H, up from 5,798 in 2024, and market estimates place the number of foreign workers at just over 7,000. However, because some categories of foreign nationals can work without a regular work permit, this number is likely higher in reality.

At the state level, the key limit on the number of foreign workers is the annual quota. For 2026, the Council of Ministers (“CoM”) set a quota of 7,427 work permits, distributed as 4,500 for the Federation of B&H (“FB&H”), 2,000 for the Republika Srpska (“RS”) and 927 for the Brčko District (“BD”). The same CoM decision divides the quota into 2,350 extensions and 5,077 permits for new employment, with the largest sectoral allocations aimed at construction (1,760), processing/manufacturing (1,060) and hospitality/catering (560).

The Two-Step System

Hiring foreign nationals in B&H is a two-step system: a work permit (either a work permit or an authorization based on other legal grounds) is obtained at the entity/BD level, while temporary residence permit is issued by the Service for Foreigners' Affairs ("SFA") under the state Ministry of Security. According to the SFA, when a foreign national intends to work for pay, they must have a work permit unless an explicit exemption applies; after the work permit is obtained, the foreign national files for temporary residence on that basis, and the person may not start working before temporary residence is approved (unless a special rule provides otherwise).

Before launching the process, employers should classify the case into one of two routes:

- Work with a work permit (quota-limited): the default route for standard employment relationships.
- Work without a work permit (exemption-based): available only for specific categories (e.g., certain key persons, founders, and other listed categories). This route still requires immigration compliance (temporary residence on that basis and/or a 'certificate of registered work', depending on the situation).

Work permits and how to apply for them

In the FB&H, work permits are issued by cantonal employment services, but upon approval of the Federal Employment Service; in the RS, by the RS Employment Service through regional offices; and in the BD, by the competent department within the BD Government. A work permit is job-and-employer-specific and cannot exceed one year in validity.

From an employer's standpoint, the biggest operational risk is assuming that quotas and labor shortages guarantee a permit. On the contrary, quotas are a hard cap and can become an administrative bottleneck precisely when shortages are most acute.

In the FB&H, a key step is checking whether suitable candidates exist in unemployment registers for the requested occupation and conditions. The Federal Employment Service procedure envisages a check against unemployment records as part of the process, and in practice employers are often asked to provide a written justification for hiring a foreign national (especially where local labour supply is formally recorded).

What Changed in the FBH in 2026: Fewer Grey Zones, Focus on Completeness

The May 2026 amendments to the FB&H Law on Employment of Foreigners introduced several changes that matter in practice.

First, extensions now have a strict filing window: the employer must apply for a work permit extension no earlier than 60 days and no later than 30 days before the permit expires.

Second, the cantonal employment service must issue a decision within 30 days from a complete application, which should improve predictability where administrations follow the rule consistently.

At the same time, the amendments sharpen the consequences of poor preparation: if the employer fails to submit required evidence and does not rectify deficiencies within an additional deadline, the employment service must reject the request. In other words, completeness of applications is now central to their success.

With the latest amendments, the Federal Employment Service must adopt (by 30 October each year) a decision on deficit occupations, and for those occupations the issuing authority should not need to check the unemployment registry during the permit process. If implemented transparently and updated realistically, this seems to be the most promising route to reduce formalism for roles that are plainly hard to fill.

Temporary Residence

Following the issuance of a work permit, a foreign national needs a temporary residence permit to work legally in B&H. Applications for the first temporary residence permit and extensions are filed with the SFA, and the first application is usually submitted from outside B&H via a BH diplomatic-consular mission. Filing from inside B&H is generally limited to cases where the person entered with a long-stay visa or is a citizen of a visa-free regime country. Applications are submitted personally, and address registration on arrival is a core compliance step.

Two compliance points deserve emphasis:

1. For visa-free entrants staying longer than three days, the accommodation provider must report the foreigner's stay to the SFA or police within 48 hours of entry.
2. Work cannot start before residence is approved. A foreign national may not begin working based on a work permit before temporary residence is approved (unless otherwise provided by law).

Finally, the SFA notes that temporary residence based on a work permit is typically granted for the validity period of the work permit plus 30 days, but not longer than one year.

Foreign Directors and Board Members and “Registered Work”

A recurring issue in corporate practice is the status of foreign directors, management board members, or key executives. Where they qualify as a ‘key person’ or fall within another exemption, companies can usually use the ‘work without a work permit’ route, which is procedurally simpler than obtaining a quota work permit. In those cases, the core compliance instrument is the Certificate on Registered Work, which must be obtained before any work starts.

The request for the certificate is filed on Form 17 with the SFA field office competent for the place where the work will be performed. It may be submitted by the foreign national, the employer, or the person using the foreigner’s services.

The application must include a copy of the foreign national’s passport, an employment contract or another document that clearly describes the role and scope of work, and proof of payment of the administrative fee; documents in a foreign language should be provided together with a certified translation into one of the official languages in B&H.

Before issuing the certificate, the SFA performs checks against its records and, where needed, operational checks. If the documentation does not clearly show that the engagement fits an exempted category, or if checks indicate that the declared purpose of stay and work is inconsistent with the supporting evidence, the certificate will not be issued.

Once issued, one copy is provided to the foreign national and one to the employer. In terms of duration, the certificate allows work only during the validity of the foreign national's visa or visa-free stay, or during a previously approved temporary residence.

For exempted categories, work is limited to up to 90 days in one calendar year. If the planned engagement does not fit an exemption (or exceeds the allowed period), the company should use the standard route: obtain a work permit (subject to quotas) and then secure temporary residence on that basis before any work begins.

Conclusion

Employing foreign nationals in Bosnia and Herzegovina requires careful navigation of a fragmented but increasingly structured legal framework. While labour shortages and rising quotas create opportunities, success in practice depends on choosing the correct legal route, preparing complete documentation, and aligning work authorisation with residence procedures.

Recent reforms, particularly in the Federation of BH, signal a shift towards greater procedural clarity but also stricter compliance expectations. Employers that plan proactively, understand available exemptions, and treat immigration steps as part of overall workforce strategy will be best positioned to engage foreign talent efficiently and lawfully.

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