

"EU Stories" Presentation and Debate organised by Populari at the Mission of Bosnia-and-Herzegovina

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The Sarajevo-based think tank Populari organised, on the 12th June, a presentation and discussion on several socio-economic issues BiH is facing. This event was hosted by the Mission of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the European Union in Brussels. In addition, Populari brought together representatives of the EU External Action Service, of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Representation of Kanton Sarajevo to take part in the debate on BiH's EU accession process.

The members of Populari presented several "EU stories" as examples of successful initiatives led by civil society in BiH. Policy Researcher Katarina Cvikić explained the reasons for Populari to research on topics related to the EU. The think tank was founded in 2007 as a response to the lack of research conducted by domestic and well-informed organisations on BiH. Its aim was to gather young and creative professionals in order to research socio-economic and political topics by doing field research as much as policy-oriented desk research.



Bosnia-and-Herzegovina not always late on EU integration

Ms Cvikić recalled that in 2007 **Bosnia and Herzegovina was not lagging behind on its EU integration process** as it can be seen today. In 2008, the country launched the visa-liberalization dialogue, signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) and the Interim trade agreement with the EU as well as the IPA framework agreement. After a slow-down in 2009 which saw the European Court of Human Rights ruling on "Sejdic-Finci", later to become one of the main complications for BiH EU integration, the year 2010 saw several breakthrough with the ratification of the SAA and the successful organisation of the general election by BiH without the involvement of the international community. However, after these elections and through the year 2011, inter-party political fighting prevailed and the public debate shifted far away from EU accession.

In parallel, Croatia pursued on its path to the EU and is now on the verge of acceding. Their negotiation process however did not go without problems and caused several quarrels between state institutions and ministries on how to share responsibilities. One lesson to be learnt from them according to Ms Cvikić would be that negotiations should be centralized, although this did not imply a centralised state and left room for other actors such as civil society organisations. There is however a **need for a clear and functioning coordination mechanism**.

Ms Cvikić stated that EU stood as one of the most relevant research topics for Populari as it affects citizens' life in all areas. **The EU should however be more concrete, practical and understandable to citizens**. There is indeed a strong frustration among the public and politicians regarding BiH's process of EU integration (recently illustrated by Doris Pack's call for the suspension of BiH from the Council of Europe). Populari insists however that BiH's EU process does not include only politicians but also civil society actors, religious institutions, private companies, the media and so on.



Successful stories in BiH

Populari researchers, Ms Cvikić, Ms Vesna Malenica and Mr Ajdin Perco went on to present three success stories involving one newspaper, a small municipality of northern Bosnia and a waste packaging management company. The first story illustrated the fact that media are the most trusted institution in BiH and presented the example of a newspaper treating EU policies in very clear manner focusing the very practical aspects of the life of citizens. The second story provided the example of a municipality administration which clearly understood where BiH stood in the use of IPA funds and made a successful use of it. They created, for example, a position for an advisor to the mayor in regards to EU funds. The third story exposed the environmental, economic and employment potential of BiH regarding waste management, by presenting the activities of companies earning money by recycling waste or financially rewarding citizens for collecting trash to be recycled, encouraged by the example of some practices in EU countries.

These stories showed that comments on the country should not be limited to the failures of politics but that there is a very high potential of civil society which must be further exploited. These represent valuable elements to build on for the EU accession process.