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Bosnia-Herzegovina and the European Union: Strong European Identity in Spite of Scepticism

Introduction

Bosnia-Herzegovina and the European Union: where do we stand?

In March 2000 Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) received a Road Map with 18 key conditions that needed to be fulfilled in order to develop a feasibility study necessary for the start of the Agreement of Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) in December 2002. In October 2005 the European Commission announced that the Road Map conditions had been fulfilled. The Commission recommended the opening of negotiations on the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) after BiH had fulfilled 16 of the conditions. The official negotiations started on November 25th 2005. The SAA was finally signed on June 16th 2008 in Luxembourg. The main goal of the SAA is the accession of Bosnia-Herzegovina to the EU in a period of six to ten years. In 2008 the process the visa liberalisation started and since December 2010 citizens of BiH can travel without visas to all Schengen states. As a precondition for this, the BiH government had to fulfil 174 technical conditions, the main condition being the introduction of biometric passports.

The progress report of the European Commission stated in 2012 that Bosnia-Herzegovina has achieved only limited progress in fulfilling the political criteria; the constitutional reform has not been started yet. Small progress has been made in market economy functioning, which needs further reforms. Progress has been made in the alignment of domestic legislation with the EU in the field of free trade, intellectual property, research as well as freedom and security, but in the field of employment, food safety and environment the progress has been inadequate.

In February 2013, Doris Pack, Member of European Parliament, presented a Resolution on Bosnia-Herzegovina, which listed all political and economic problems in the country. As one of the biggest concerns, the Resolution mentioned the lack of a joint vision in the state.

The public perception of EU access in BiH

In Bosnia-Herzegovina EU access used to be seen as the most important political process on which the future and prosperity of the country depends. However, after the rise of Europhilia in the first phase of accession, the popular support to EU accession and related reforms is declining in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is interesting, however, that this is not due to

classical Euro-scepticism, but rather a consequence of the general idea that the problems of BiH are so immense that not even EU accession could help solving them.

It is important to mention that it is difficult to draw conclusions concerning the general public perception of EU accession, since the public in Bosnia-Herzegovina is divided along entity and ethnic lines. The public perception of EU accession differs in the Republic of Srpska, where the EU is seen as a process that could jeopardise the existence of the RS, and in the Federation of BiH, on the other hand, where the EU is seen as a guarantee for the continuation of BiH as a state or as an external solution to the internal division of the country.

The Foreign Policy Initiative in Bosnia-Herzegovina has done research on public perception of EU accession among the population of BiH in 2012 and their results show that citizens see EU accession as a solution for the main problems in the country, as a tool for tension relief, the preservation of peace and stability of the country and improvements of the standard of living. People manifest a strong sense of European identity, which may come as a surprise since the majority of the population has a strong ethnic identity, but they believe that these two do not exclude each other.

There are two main issues publically debated regarding the accession of BiH to the EU: the political and the economic aspect. The political aspect of accession is mainly debated along two questions: will the EU accession solve the internal political problems of Bosnia-Herzegovina and what is the main political reason that prevents Bosnia-Herzegovina in making progress towards the EU? The debate on the main economic aspects of accession focuses on the question what impact the EU market economy will have on the BiH. The Croatian accession intensified the public debate about the lack of political will in Bosnia-Herzegovina to fulfil the necessary pre-conditions for Bosnia-Herzegovina's accession. The public believes that political actors do not do really make an effort to implement the structural reforms that could bring the country closer to the EU and that they work more in their own interest than in the interest of the country. They think that a political acceptance of an ill-prepared BiH into the EU may cause more harm than good. Regional neighbours are seen as being more dedicated to meeting EU standards, but their level of cooperation is, according to the research by the Foreign Policy Initiative, increasingly explained by western-style pragmatism. The research observes that the respondents do not have enough information about this process in Serbia, but they all stress that Croatia is, in a way, already part of the EU and that Serbia is progressing faster because its system is orderly. They do not, however, think that living standards are much better in Serbia and Croatia than in Bosnia-Herzegovina and that this is especially not the case in Montenegro, Macedonia and

Albania. Additional hindrances cited for Bosnia-Herzegovina were its complex structure of government, the multi-ethnic character of society, the lack of agreement between the three ethnicities, the lack of a unified vision and the unwillingness to accept differences.

Also, the public believes that the economy should become stronger so as to be able to cope with the pressures of regional and European market competition, before further steps towards the EU are taken. This is quite a change in comparison to public opinion several years ago, when the European market was considered as a chance for BiH citizens rather than a threat. It can be assumed that the economic crisis in the EU countries (which is widely reported on in BiH media) had an impact on this change of.

The public believes that the adoption process of EU standards and the application of the existing regulations are problematic as they depend on the agreement and goodwill of the six main political leaders in Bosnia-Herzegovina. At the same time, many respondents stress that BiH will join the EU when the EU decides so, not when the citizens of BiH want to. They wish for a de-politisation of the European integration process and for the technical process of the adoption of standards to stop being presented to the public as a political process.¹

The media discourse on EU accession

The media are one of the main sources of information about the EU accession process for the majority of the population in BiH. Most people use television as the first source of news and information, while younger people prefer the Internet. However, it is important to mention that they do not use the official websites of EU related institutions and organisations, such as the Directorate for European Integration, but prefer web portals and social networks as source of news.

The complex political structure of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the different perspectives in the two entities of EU accession are reflected in the media as well. While the media in the Federation of BiH promote the idea of EU accession as one of the means to preserve the state as a whole, the media in the Republica Srpska often report on internal problems of EU Member States arguing that EU membership is not a guarantee for a functional state.²

¹ The full report by the Foreign Policy Initiative can be found on:
http://www.vpiarhiva.test.promotim.ba/eng/monitoring_process_of_eu_integration.html.

² The Public Broadcasting Service of RS, for example, reports on Scotland's and Catalonia's demands for independence with the headlines: "Demands for Independence in EU Member States".

A survey done in June 2012 by students of the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Sarajevo³ has shown that EU accession is not a main topic in the print media: it is presented on the cover pages of daily newspapers in only 9% of the cases. Also, there is a lack of comments and deeper analytical approaches: 39% of articles are news, 40% are only short reports, most of them are protocol news related to visits of the EU officials.

The main topics of media reporting on the EU are: opinions of state and entity officials on EU accession, communications from the EU towards BiH, Croatian accession and BiH migrants to the EU as well as the visa liberalisation regime. News and reports are mainly protocol oriented and main subjects of news are: political actors of the EU visiting BiH and BiH political actors talking about EU accession. Citizens' opinion on the EU is presented in only 6% of articles and a deeper analysis of the essence of EU accession in only 11%. NGO activists are not consulted in these stories: they are only 10th on the list of possible 'interpreters' of EU accession, after political leaders, economic experts, academics etc. One of the consequences of such media interpretation of the EU accession is that the public's trust in the idea of EU accession as a solution to BiH's problems decreases. They do not trust the political elites in this process and they see EU representatives as not interested in BiH anymore. NGO representatives could play a significant role in terms of political education, if they are consulted more by the media to present their views about EU benefits for BiH.

In many media reports EU accession has been seen for a long time as a 'magic wand' that could solve all internal problems. However, two main events caused a shift in the media approach to and the public perception of EU accession. One is the Croatian accession process and the other is the economic crisis in the EU Member States.

The Croatian accession process imposed the view that it is the process that matters and makes changes (the process of adjustment of local laws and establishment of functioning state), not the admission itself. With the intensification of the Croatian accession process, 23% of the media that were analysed by students of the Faculty of Political Sciences in 2012, started promoting the idea that the process is more important in terms of establishing a functioning state and that accession is only the end of that process. Croatian anti-corruption activities, presented in BiH media as part of the establishment of a functioning state and rule of law (such as FIMI Media, Index etc.) had an impact on the change of perception: 46% of respondents in the survey said that they understand better now that the reform of state and

³ A quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis of 6 newspapers; 42 editions and in total 491 articles plus a survey with 500 citizens from five towns in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Sarajevo, Banjo Luka, Mostar, Tuzla and Brčko

rule of law is as important part of EU integrations as the accession itself. However, 24% of them said that they do not believe that the current political elites have the will to make such changes in Bosnia-Herzegovina, since some of them “may end up like Ivo Sanader”.⁴

On the other hand, economic crisis in the EU Member States enhanced Euro-scepticism. Headlines such as: “The EU cannot solve its own problems, can we expect the EU to solve ours?” occur in media and influence public perception of EU accession.

Another issue, widely debated in the media, is the visa liberalisation regime. 19% of respondents in the survey said that after visa liberalisation it is not important if and when Bosnia-Herzegovina will enter the EU. 37% of them said that with Croatia becoming a EU Member State it is important to preserve a visa liberalisation regime, since the EU will as of June 2013 will be at ‘our doorstep’. 33% of respondents expressed suspicion in willingness of the EU to fully accept Bosnia-Herzegovina, arguing that the “on and off debate regarding visa liberalisation regime is a sign that we are not welcome” (as one of them said). It is interesting that the public does not recognise illegal migrants as one of the problems that are jeopardizing the visa liberalisation regime, but rather see the unwillingness of the EU to accept BiH as the cause not the consequence of such problem.

Also, one of the arguments that some respondents used was that the “EU owes us to accept us”, having in mind the weak reaction of EU Member States to the war situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990’s, which is one of the consequences of the limited and superficial interpretation of EU accession in some media, where it is presented as an act of arbitrariness, as if there are no pre-conditions that need to be fulfilled. When it comes to pre-conditions, 27% of respondents believe that if the same pre-conditions would have been imposed on current Member States, many of them would have not been able to fulfil them, implying that they are too strict for even more developed states with less problems than Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Conclusion: what next?

When it comes to media presentation and public perception of EU accession in Bosnia-Herzegovina the two main problems are: a lack of a joint perception of EU accession throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina (that is, in their different parts: the two entities) and a lack of common goals and strategy regarding the EU accession. According to the Foreign Policy Initiative survey, all three ethnic groups see joining the European Union as a goal, but do not

⁴ Former Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader was charged by the Croatian authorities charged with corruption. In November 2012 he was sentenced to 10 years in prison in a first instance verdict.

have the same idea on how that goal should be achieved. All of the respondents have pointed out tension relief, peace and stability as their priorities, which should bring about improvements in the standard of living. However, they think that it is obvious that a regulated system is not in the BiH politicians' interest.

It is obvious that citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina are generally disappointed in the political and economic situation of the country and this, without a doubt, influences their viewpoints when it comes to EU accession. However, public opinion has not turned to full Euro-scepticism yet and citizens would have enough patience to endure reforms if these were to lead Bosnia-Herzegovina in the right direction. They do not expect changes to happen overnight because "one cannot shift from reverse into fifth gear", but they expect them to be constant.

The case of Croatia could be used in a positive direction, having in mind that the public believes that the accession process helped Croatia to solve some problems in terms of rule of law and becoming a functioning state, which could be a starting point for promoting the idea of EU accession as path along which a state can (and needs to) make progress and solve internal unsolved issues. Also, a stronger wider debate between state bodies and NGO sector in B&H should be used more as a tool for raising public awareness and promoting the idea of EU accession in a different way: as a systematic process that would lead to better life for all BiH citizens.

European identity as the idea that many B&H citizens still support, which means that the idea that Bosnia-Herzegovina has always been part of Europe and should stay there could be used more in promoting EU accession. Also, consulting NGOs in the process of explaining the whole accession process to a wider public (which is still necessary, having in mind the present lack of understanding of the general public especially in rural areas of the accession process and its consequences) could be of help.

It goes without saying that EU accession is a path that Bosnia-Herzegovina should continue. Although the economic and political crisis in EU is not helping to promote EU accession in the country, it is encouraging that citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina are not fully Eurosceptic. A more realistic and more open debate on the pros and cons of EU accession could help to improve the understanding of EU accession and the current position of Bosnia-Herzegovina in this process. However, that debate should be less focused on the ideas of the political elites and actors but on the voices of ordinary citizens, NGO actors and academics.

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