

Opening Remarks by High Representative and EU Special Representative Valentin Inzko at Plenary Session, Citizens for Europe

Citizens Want to End the Economic Crisis and Get Back on the Road to Europe

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will speak only briefly because the emphasis at meetings of Citizens for Europe is on what citizens have to say and recommend to the authorities, and on what the authorities, in turn, promise to deliver to citizens.

However, I would like to stress at the beginning of today's discussion that agriculture and rural development constitute a sector where the interests and strategies of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Union overlap completely.

For both, this is *the* key social and economic sector.

Agriculture accounts for as much as half of all jobs in Bosnia and Herzegovina if you take informal employment into account. This reflects the average across the 27 EU member states, which explains why around half of EU legislation is related to the agro-food sector, and almost half of the entire EU budget goes towards agriculture and rural development.

So, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU are very much on the same page when it comes to the central role of agriculture and rural development.

I also want to stress that the scope for turning agriculture and rural development into a dynamo for economic growth is significant. Although half the BiH population work in rural areas, the agro-food sector accounts for just ten percent of GDP, and Bosnia and Herzegovina is a net food importer.

There is massive potential to improve productivity and create new and better paying jobs

- by establishing modern and efficient institutional support for agriculture and rural development;
- by supporting inward investment and effective marketing and export strategies; and
- by preparing the sector to absorb EU technical and financial assistance, which will grow exponentially when Bosnia and Herzegovina secures candidate membership status.

I think it's worth pointing out that in some new member states, rural communities were initially sceptical about the benefits of integration – but their actual experience during and after accession, in terms of enhanced social and economic support, has changed that scepticism into enthusiastic support for the EU.

The Common Agricultural Policy, which has been substantially reformed and modernised in the last decade, focuses on meeting contemporary demands for reliable and ecological farming and sustainable rural development. It is orientated towards producing a safe, plentiful and affordable food supply and ensuring livelihoods among the rural population.

This is one of the messages that I hope will go from this meeting today – EU accession will bring real benefits to BiH citizens who depend on agriculture for employment; it will bring real benefits to rural communities, and it will bring real benefits to the population as a whole by strengthening food security and stimulating the BiH economy.

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The Stabilisation and Association Agreement for its part envisages the modernisation and restructuring of the BiH agriculture sector so that it can absorb EU development funds and so that BiH agro-producers can compete successfully in the Single Market.

Clearly, accomplishing many of these things will be held back until a new government has been formed.

The overriding priority – in agriculture and in every other sector of the BiH economy – is therefore to form a Council of Ministers.

Even before this happens, the authorities present here today can make important preparations to help the new government. The parliamentarians who are with us have the capacity to enact legislation in this sector that will benefit citizens. Ministries can implement existing legislation. The civil society partners are here to help you prioritise, and to inform and support your decisions.

This will be an effective means of addressing the economic crisis – which has been allowed to continue for much too long and which has done untold damage to BiH households.

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So, today's meeting is timely. The civic partners have completed a process of dynamic and structured consultation with farmers, technical experts, representatives of rural communities and other stakeholders. As a result, they are now in a position to present the incoming authorities with concrete and actionable proposals. Representatives of the authorities who are present here today are therefore in good position to reflect on these key stakeholders' needs and recommendations.

This civic voice is one that the incoming authorities must heed.

If they do that they will carry out the practical reforms that can get Bosnia and Herzegovina out of the economic crisis and back on the road to Europe.

It is important that citizens speak clearly and forcefully, and it is important that the authorities listen.

It is important that citizens and the authorities *maintain* this dialogue.

It's not a coincidence that the Citizens for Europe process encompasses strategic areas including, education, the fight against corruption, energy and the environment, agriculture and rural development, and labour and employment. These have a direct impact on every citizen. In the agricultural sector the debate is – literally – about putting food on the family table.

I believe that – because of the extensive and intensive nature of the consultation process – the recommendations that are made by the Citizens for Europe present here today will have the force of common sense.

This should find favour with the incoming authorities – because it makes complete sense to implement the European Partnership and the SAA reforms.

These reforms will take this country into Europe and they will help to improve living conditions even before membership is achieved.

It is common sense for the authorities to focus on achieving the consensus that can make these positive things happen.

I look forward to working with you to ensure that sensible proposals from citizens are accepted and implemented by policymakers. This is our ultimate objective.

Thank you