

RS Government Hosts AER European Citizens' Forum

Richard Medic presents "Subsidiarity is a word" movement

The Republic of Srpska last Friday hosted a European Citizens' Forum in Banja Luka in cooperation with the Assembly of European Regions (AER.eu), an organization which represents over 260 regional authorities in 33 countries across the wider Europe. Speaker of the RS People's Assembly Igor Radojicic and BiH Chief Negotiator with the EU Igor Davidovic joined local and Brussels-based EU experts in an open dialogue with citizens, the seventh in a series of AER forums held in regions across Europe and the first held in the western Balkans. Apart from hearing about the opportunities available to the RS in Brussels and in AER's network of member regions, the forum explored the often-ambivalent relationship between BiH's levels of government in the path towards EU membership. In his speech to the forum, AER spokesman Richard Medic talked about an idea relatively unknown in BiH politics: the principle of subsidiarity. The following is an excerpt:

"...I want to tell you about a movement we launched last month in Brussels and which is just as relevant to BiH as it is to the EU states.

The movement is called "Subsidiarity is a word", and it aims to secure recognition of the word in every major dictionary of languages worldwide. I'm like to know how many of you have heard of the word and actually know what it means, because 6 months ago I didn't, simply because its meaning is more familiar to us than the word itself is.

"Subsidiarity" refers to the principle that decisions should be taken as closely as possible to the citizen. Which means that Europe's regions should be the states' real partners in the European Project, since it is regional and local governments that are usually best equipped to respond to the unique needs of their citizens. Around 70% of EU legislation is implemented at regional and local levels, a fact which says a lot about the importance of subsidiarity in Europe.

The principle of subsidiarity has been a pillar of social, theological and political thought for centuries; it's referred to in legal statutes, state constitutions and

international treaties; the Lisbon Treaty alone mentions the word 30 times.

And yet, despite its importance, the word is yet to be recognized by many dictionaries and by that citadel of linguistic influence, Microsoft Word spell check. Which raises the question: How can the EU, its members and other states respect a principle based on a word that so many dictionaries - and therefore citizens - do not even recognize?



So last month we sent open letters of demand to Microsoft and to 71 dictionaries in 23 languages, including a number of dictionaries in Serbia, Croatia and BiH. To promote the movement we pitched the story to media all over Europe; we distributed 5000 of these postcards to the European institutions in Brussels and Strasbourg; we even launched a Facebook group where members can "shame" dictionaries that do not include the word.

And of course what real European movement kicks off without its spokesman getting mistakenly arrested? I won't go into the story now, but you can actually see the arrest on YouTube. You can imagine the Belgian police's reaction when I showed them my BiH ID card; sadly, it says a lot about the perception in Brussels of a country still known for little more than burek, Bregovic and bloodbaths.

Our movement is generating a lot of media attention, debate and support in Brussels and across Europe. We've already received replies to our open letters - dictionaries from all over Europe have promised to include the word in future editions. But we're still waiting for a reply from Microsoft, which is giving some influential journalists and conspiracy theorists in Brussels cause for speculation; they're asking what does Bill

Gates' very centralized corporation have against the principle of subsidiarity?

As with everything in BiH, subsidiarity becomes a somewhat problematic idea when we take into account this state's complex executive and legislative structures, not to mention the vital national interest clauses. In so-called "normal" countries, the principle advocates greater decentralization and local self-governance. But talking about these ideas in BiH invokes fear - fear of ethnic interests, fear of out-voting, and fear of separatist tendencies.

Nevertheless, I dream - however idealistic it may sound now - that subsidiarity can become a key principle in BiH politics. Let's take the police reforms as an example: I think it's clear that the reason it took so long for a resolution was the fact that most of the debate focused on ethnic considerations and political interests, rather than the needs of those the police are supposed to be protecting: the citizens.

Had the principle of subsidiarity been applied to the debate, the fundamental question would not have been "Does this reform harm Bosniak, Croat or Serb interests?" The question would have been "Which level of government is best equipped to secure the most efficient and effective police service for citizens?" I'm no expert on police reform, so I don't know the answer to that question. But taking this pragmatic, citizen-oriented approach to legislative reform is how subsidiarity works, and it's what AER has been promoting since it successfully lobbied for the inclusion of the principle in the EU's Maastricht Treaty of 1992.

You may say that no, BiH has too many competing ethnic and political interests to secure consensus on the big issues. But look at it this way: AER's political positions are reached by debate and compromise between 260 regional authorities from 33 countries, covering the whole political, ideological and ethnic spectrum of wider Europe. If AER can secure consensus between politicians from such diverse regions in "old" Europe, central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Russia and Turkey, should it always be so difficult to find common ground between Sarajevo, Mostar and Banja Luka?