



TransConflict Serbia

Policy Proposal -

*A National Forum on EU
Integration?*

A National Forum on EU Integration - Reconstituting European Debate in Serbia

Introduction

By ratifying the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) in September 2008, Serbia has taken a small but significant step towards membership of the European Union (EU). In order to now further accelerate the integration process, there is a pressing need for greater public participation in debates about Serbia's European future; currently concentrated amongst the traditional political, academic and business elites. To facilitate such democratic engagement on the issue of accession towards the EU, this paper proposes the establishment of a National Forum on EU Integration - based upon the highly innovative and influential National Forum on Europe in the Republic of Ireland.

By making the EU a more visible part of domestic policy debate and by addressing specific and legitimate concerns regarding future membership of the EU, a National Forum on EU Integration will contribute to creating a deeper and more substantive sense of ownership over, and involvement in, the entire process. The Forum will also facilitate an enriched and broader understanding amongst citizens of what accession actually entails, thereby contributing to the 'Europeanisation' of public policy discussions and the creation of a broad coalition in support of EU membership.

This paper is divided into four sections. Section A will focus on the Irish example, detailing the initial motivations behind the establishment of a National Forum and its positive effect on attitudes towards the EU. In Section B, the proposed structure and activities of a future National Forum on EU Integration for Serbia are outlined in detail; whilst Section C presents two mechanisms designed to promote citizen participation in the work of the Forum - Regional Public Meetings and a Submissions Process. The final section will conclude with those factors deemed paramount to the success of a National Forum on EU Integration in Serbia.

A) The Irish Experience – Challenging Misconceptions and Apprehensions

Ireland's rejection of the Treaty of Nice in a 2001 referendum highlighted the extent of apathy and discontent felt amongst citizens towards the EU. The low turnout and claims that key issues had not been adequately discussed emphasised the need for a thorough debate on the EU and its impact on Ireland. In response, the Labour Party proposed the idea of a forum as a means of creating a structured public space within which Irish citizens could contribute directly to the debate on Europe. Having been positively received by both the Government and other political parties, a National Forum on Europe was established in October 2001 with a mandate to “facilitate a broad discussion of issues relevant to Ireland’s membership of an enlarging Union and to consider the range of topics arising in the context of the debate on the Future of Europe”.

On launching the forum, then Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, asserted that he wanted:

“our national debate to be as wide-ranging as possible and I believe that the Forum will be structured and organised to achieve that goal...Let us look clearly at the facts. Let us try to distinguish between the real and the imaginary, the possible and the impossible, the likely and the unlikely...Whether as political representatives or as leaders in civic society, we have a duty to conduct the debate in ways that will inform and enlighten the people we serve”.

Since 2001, the National Forum has made an invaluable contribution to broadening and deepening the understanding of parliamentarians and citizens alike on key EU matters, whilst also having a number of practical impacts on policy making in Ireland. In the wake of the defeat of the Treaty of Nice, the Forum provided a neutral space in which to analyse the deep-seated concerns expressed by the 'No' vote. Accordingly, the twin fears regarding the lack of a rigorous system of parliamentary scrutiny of EU legislation and perceived threats to Ireland's traditional policy of neutrality were addressed by the Government through legislation and a European Council Declaration. These tangible successes served to reinforce both the standing and effectiveness of the Forum.

All political parties represented in the Irish parliament continue to support and participate in the work of the Forum, with Government Ministers, party leaders and members addressing the Forum and engaging in debate. The Forum has also attracted high calibre speakers, including the President

of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, and the former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan. Participating members in the Special Observer Pillar of the Forum (see *Section B, 'Forum Structure and Activities'*) continue to actively support the Forum's work and additional organisations have applied to join. The response to the Forum's public request for submissions has been significant and the number of hits on the Forum web-site has continued to grow. The Forum's youth programme has consistently expanded since 2001, with an increasing number of young people seeking to participate in Youth Fora. Regional media coverage of the work of the Forum has been extensive. As a result, the National Forum on Europe is increasingly seen as a model for democratic engagement on EU-related issues.

The success of the second Nice referendum highlights the effectiveness of the Forum in terms of raising the level of knowledge and understanding about EU issues. Whilst abstention in the first referendum was fuelled in large by a lack of understanding about the Nice Treaty, the Forum played a key role in increasing turnout by fifteen per cent, from thirty-five per cent to fifty per cent, in the second referendum. Around twenty-five per cent of the electorate found the Forum to be a useful source of information in the run-up to the second referendum, with twenty-five per cent feeling that they better understood some of the main issues.

To date, the Forum has held ninety-eight plenary meetings and a large number of regional meetings. A broad range of EU-related issues have been discussed, such as young people and women in an enlarging Europe, cultural diversity, EU-US relations and social development issues. To encourage public debate, the Forum has produced a range of informational materials, including a summary of the Lisbon Treaty that introduced the main elements in a clear and easily understandable way. The Forum's Chairman has also produced a series of consensus reports, which impartially cover the range of debates and issues explored. As Bertie Ahern proudly affirms, “the Forum is playing a crucial role in allowing people to openly express their views and concerns about our membership of the European Union”. Following Ireland's rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in June 2008, the Forum again has a crucial role to play in clarifying those negative misconceptions that heavily impacted the vote.

B) A National Forum on EU Integration - Structure and Activities

Structure

1. The Forum is intended to provide a representative, politically neutral and inclusive public space in which both advocates and opponents of European integration can offer opinion and analysis on specific issues. The Forum should therefore ideally comprise the entire political spectrum, including those more critical, Euro-sceptic voices. The Forum itself does not advocate or promote a particular course of action or political stance.
2. The NFoEUI will be comprised of:
 - Forum Chairman and Vice-Chairman - independent candidates who, together with a Steering Committee and an independent Secretariat, are responsible for the management of the Forum's business, including setting the agenda and chairing Forum meetings.
 - All political parties represented in the Serbian Parliament – the membership entitlement for each party will reflect the current distribution of seats within parliament;
 - A Special Observer Pillar – composed of a broad cross-section of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), including trade unions, employers' and farmers' organizations, religious and minority groups, plus representatives from the various minority National Councils (of Bosniaks, Croats and Hungarians etc., respectively) and other registered political parties not represented in the Serbian Parliament;
 - Representatives from Kosovo, including CSOs and elected officials.
3. The final decision on membership of the NFoEUI will be made by the Forum's Chairman. Membership of the NFoEUI will be reviewed every six months to ensure that it remains broadly representative of the entire political spectrum.
4. The Chairman should be an independent, respected and experienced professional, i.e. a former civil servant or diplomat, ideally without party affiliation. One of the prime responsibilities of the Chairman will be the production of periodic reports that will summarise the issues raised and conclusions reached in Forum debates.
5. Membership of the Special Observer Pillar will confer specific privileges, including the right to

intervene, under the authority of the Chairman, in plenary discussions; access to the agenda, papers and all documents put before the plenary sessions; systematic consultation with the Chairman and access to the Forum Secretariat.

6. The day-to-day management of the Forum will be the responsibility of two permanent structures:
 - ***Steering Committee*** - includes the Chairman, one representative from each of the five main political parties and four nominated representatives of the Special Observer Pillar.
 - ***Independent Secretariat*** - headed by a Director appointed by the Prime Minister and comprised primarily of civil servants seconded from the Office for European Integration and other relevant Ministries. It is envisaged that two full-time staff would be required, plus a Communications Officer.
7. The NFOEUI would exist as an independent agency, receiving its funding directly from the Government, ideally from the Prime Minister's Office or the Office for European Integration.
8. The resources allocated to the Forum would be sufficient so as to cover all expenses including for salaries, publications, travel and meetings. The use of these funds will be audited by the State Audit Institution (SAI) and publicly disclosed in the Forum's annual report.
9. The Forum will require use of government facilities suitable for plenary and other meetings.
10. Technical advice and assistance would be sought from both the National Forum on Europe in Ireland and the Delegation of the European Commission to Serbia.

Activities

11. The Forum will facilitate debate in a plethora of ways, primarily through formal plenary sessions involving the members and Special Observers of the Forum, which will take place four times a year and will be open to the public.
12. The Forum will also hold less formal regional public meetings, attended by a selection of regular Forum participants, and invite written submissions from individuals and organizations (for further details, see *Section C – 'Enhancing Citizen Participation in the Work of the Forum'*).

13. The plenary sessions will be conducted according to agreed rules of procedure so as to ensure equal opportunities to contribute to the debate. The Chairman and the Steering Committee will set the agenda for each plenary session, with the themes for discussion evolving from prior sessions and public recommendations.
14. Guest speakers from a variety of European backgrounds (member states, candidate countries, the European Commission/Parliament) will be invited to address the Forum.
15. Publicising the work of the Forum relies upon generating serious and consistent media interest at both the local and national level, ensuring in-depth, analytical coverage of the Forum's work. The Forum Secretariat's Communications Officer will be responsible for engaging the media.
16. The Forum's web-site will include verbatim reports of the Forum's plenary sessions, reports on its regional meetings and the Chairman's reports. Selected public submissions will also be listed, archived audio of previous sessions will be made available and citizen interaction will be promoted through on-line fora and opinion polls.
17. The Forum, in collaboration with CSOs and the EU, will produce user-friendly introductions and summaries of key EU Treaties and texts, plus guides to important issues, so that the EU is clearly articulated and understood.
18. The Forum will organise outreach activities, including conferences and publications, designed to target those most commonly disengaged from European issues, such as young people, women, Roma, minority groups and rural populations.
19. Through the Forum's Youth Programme, young people will be encouraged to engage with EU issues, attend public meetings and make written submissions.

C) Enhancing Citizen Participation in the Work of the Forum

1. To enhance citizen participation in the work of the Forum, two important mechanisms will be employed to augment the structured deliberation amongst Forum members in the plenary sessions:

- **Regional Public Meetings** – in which citizens can directly question appointed Forum representatives.
- **Submissions Process** – questions from the public, a selection of which will be debated by the Forum.

2. **Regional Public Meetings**

- i. In order to strengthen understanding of EU integration at the local level, and to build relations between the Forum and local communities, the Forum will regularly hold deliberative meetings in a variety of settings (schools, universities, town halls and local community facilities) throughout Serbia.
- ii. Regional Public Meetings will be more informal in terms of both structure and atmosphere than the plenary sessions, including a variety of guest speakers chosen from amongst the Forum's membership.
- iii. These public meetings, which will be organised around specific themes of relevance to the local community, will provide a neutral space in which citizens can debate issues of concern related to the EU integration process.
- iv. The impact of regional public meetings will be gauged in a number of ways, including the numbers of people attending, local media coverage, and success in engaging people in the Forum's work.

3. **Submissions Process**

- i. A second mechanism for enhancing public participation in the EU integration debate is the submissions process, which will allow interested parties to directly submit questions to the Forum in either written or oral form.
- ii. Oral and written submissions will be invited from individual citizens, CSOs, businesses, trade unions, religious organisations and political parties not represented in the Forum.

- iii. These submissions will be either discussed directly or reflected in the Forum's agenda. The selection of submissions for oral presentation will be made by the Forum's Chairman and Vice-Chairman, aided by the Forum's secretariat.
 - iv. To complement the submissions process, the Forum secretariat will post selected submissions onto its web-site, thereby establishing a 'virtual Forum' in which the wider public can take part in debate on the issues raised.
4. To encourage participation in the regional public meetings, the Forum will work closely with CSOs, particular members of the Special Observer Pillar, to ensure that debates are tailored to the specific concerns of citizens and the CSOs that represent these concerns.
 5. The Forum will improve the capacity of CSOs to articulate, aggregate and represent their own issues and interests. In spite of the impetus for co-operation between CSOs, central to the multi-beneficiary approach of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, research shows that CSOs find it difficult to develop co-operative strategies despite similar general interests, institutional positions and political constraints. By adopting common policies and positions based around issues raised in the Forum, co-ordination and communication between CSOs will continue to evolve.
 6. By participating in the work of the Forum, CSOs will also benefit from an enhanced public profile and creation of systematic channels for their participation.

D) Conclusion

The establishment of a National Forum on EU Integration would provide a new public arena for dialogue and deliberation on European issues; “dedicated to demystifying Europe, to helping the average citizen understand how Europe affects daily life” in the words of Senator Maurice Hayes, Chairman of the Irish National Forum on Europe. By allowing a wider and more inclusive group of actors to engage in and contribute to the debate over Serbia's European future, the forum will provide institutionalised public space in which a broader conception of EU integration can be advanced and articulated; one that focuses on both the economic and non-economic dimensions of membership. Furthermore, by promoting participatory democratic engagement, the National Forum on EU Integration will contribute to the consolidation of democracy in Serbia.

To ensure the success of the Forum in achieving these aims, steps must be taken to ensure it remains politically inclusive, with an independent and experienced Chair and Secretariat, balanced and impartial debate, a broad regional outlook and regular engagement with civil society. Through two participatory mechanisms – Regional Public Meetings and the Submissions Process – the Forum will demonstrate the virtues of civic engagement. The Forum will also provide the basis for a sustained information campaign about EU-related issues, targeted at all Ministries, public institutions, small and medium enterprises and the general public. The Forum's innovative mechanisms are likely to be replicated in other policy areas.

Whilst it remains unclear as to whether the model of the National Forum on Europe in Ireland could be successfully adapted and transferred to the Serbian context, this policy paper is intended to serve as the basis for further discussion about re-designing and refining institutional frameworks in order to promote citizen participation in the on-going EU integration debate. As the Financial Times insisted in 2005, there is an “urgent need to have an open democratic debate in every member state – on the lines of Ireland's National Forum on Europe – on the way forward. If they avoid it, the eventual answer will always be No”.