

First inspiring session of the Civic Forum

A first lively and inspiring session of the Civic Forum, an initiative of the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, took place yesterday at the High Representative's home in Sarajevo. For three-and-a-half hours, the host of the gathering and eight intellectuals and representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina's non-governmental, civic society discussed topics relating to the Civic Forum itself as well as the underlying meaning and the importance of civic society in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

At the beginning of the meeting, the High Representative explained that he had initiated the Civic Forum in order to provide his concept of ownership with a deeper dimension. He said he hoped the Forum would trigger a public debate about issues that are important for Bosnia and Herzegovina's further development, and help the non-governmental, civic sector gain more influence in the political discourse of BiH, which has until now been dominated by the agendas of political parties, elected officials and representatives of the international community.

His guests – in alphabetical order, Fra Petar Andjelovic, Srdjan Dizdarevic, Sacir Filandra, Zdravko Grebo, Boro Kontic, Ivan Lovrenovic, Zarko Papic and Sevima Sali Terzic – welcomed this initiative.

While there were no formal conclusions, the debate centred on the following issues:

- the definition of civic society,
- reasons for its weakness in Bosnia and Herzegovina (mentioned were, among many others, the paralysing effect of the bad economic situation, the lack of

- democratic experience and of the concept of individual responsibility, a general atmosphere of fear, and the destructive effect of the war on BiH's social fabric),
- the lack of focus on the part of BiH officials and citizens to rebuild their country – in contrast to the situation that existed in former Yugoslavia as well as in many other European countries after World War II,
 - the surprising passivity of BiH citizens with regard to issues that affect them personally, such as strict visa requirements all over the world and the current lack of natural gas in Sarajevo,
 - the need for BiH's society to re-invent itself and define what Bosnia and Herzegovina can and should become,
 - ways in which the role of the civic society in BiH's development can be strengthened,
 - the changing relationship with the international community,
 - the role of the media and public broadcasting, and
 - the concept of European integration.

At the end of the meeting, the High Representative thanked his guests for sharing their ideas and thoughts with him and asked them to provide him with papers on issues they considered important to be explored further, and suggestions for future participants in the Civic Forum.

The High Representative's intention is to organise Civic Forum meetings approximately every six weeks, primarily at his home in Sarajevo, but also in other towns, depending on the issue to be discussed. Each session will have between five and ten participants who may or may not change from one meeting to the next, as well as a different and flexible agenda.

The High Representative hopes that the Civic Forum will become an informal yet institutionalised form of dialogue between the International Community and the intellectuals and representatives of the civic society in Bosnia and

Herzegovina. He will take proposals made at the meetings seriously, and plans to follow up on some of them with policy initiatives.