

# CAFÉ EUROPE

## The EU as an anchor for peace

Osman Topcagic and Bosnia's early EU aspirations

Alexandra Stigl Mayer 22 February 2010



*Osman Topcagic. Photo: pre tv tv*

**At the beginning of the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Osman Topcagic lost his sister, who was killed by shell fire. He also lost two cousins. During the siege of Sarajevo he went cold and hungry for days. It was the war, says Topcagic, which turned him into a dedicated promoter of Bosnia's membership of the European Union. Topcagic was to become the first director of Bosnia's Directorate for European Integration.**

**O**sman Topcagic appreciates the EU for reconciling former enemies and establishing peace in Europe. Accession to the EU, he hopes, will produce a similar effect in Bosnia, calming political and ethnic tensions and improving the economy.

*“The principles on which the EU is built and established are, I think, very deeply understood and accepted by Bosnians. It’s peace, it’s stability, it’s economic prosperity. With the experience of the war, of such suffering going on for so long, we have embraced such an idea full-heartedly.”*

In 1970, when Topcagic was 18 and had just finished school in his home town Sarajevo, he did not aim for a diplomatic career. He studied mathematics and later specialised in computer programming and project management. From 1979 onwards, he worked for UNIS, one of Bosnia’s biggest socially-owned companies.

This was a good time in former Yugoslavia. Topcagic was earning a decent salary and often travelling on business. In 1980 he got married. His first daughter was born two years later; his second, in 1984, when Sarajevo hosted the Winter Olympics.

The war changed Topcagic’s life. In 1993, after UNIS had stopped operating, Topcagic was called up by the Bosnian government to help save the Interior Ministry’s computer system. Eight months later, his management skills and knowledge of English having made an impression on his colleagues and superiors, Topcagic was offered the post of General-Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the time, the ministry was a rudimentary structure, with only 30 staff based in Sarajevo.

During the peace negotiations in Dayton, Ohio, in November 1995, there was talk about developing relations between Bosnia and the EU. The idea resonated with Topcagic.

*“Although I was not in Dayton, I was told that some participants were even mentioning the possibility of Bosnia immediately joining the EU with a special status and based on a special procedure. From our side, Prime Minister Haris Silajdzic and Foreign Minister Sacirbey advocated this idea. I was told that some participants from EU member states had a positive attitude towards it. But then the idea got lost ... Being aware of it, I raised it with our first post-war foreign minister, Jadranko Prlic [a Bosnian-Croat politician, later indicted for war crimes]. After some time, he accepted it. I was proposing special relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU – admittedly, without much understanding or elaboration what the special relations could or should mean.”*

When the UK held the EU Presidency in the first half of 1998, Foreign Minister Prlic proposed the idea of a special relationship between Bosnia and the EU to his UK counterpart Robin Cook. Topcagic followed up by discussing the proposal with various UK officials and asking the Bosnian administration to endorse it.

*"I could not say exactly what it would mean. When I was asked, I said, 'Ok, we are a new state, we have to build a system of governance, an economy and public institutions, and if we are starting more or less from scratch, let's make it all compatible with the EU.' It seemed to me quite natural. And Britain then proposed the idea, and it was adopted in June 1998 at the foreign ministers' meeting in Luxemburg. There was a declaration on Bosnia. That's what we count as the beginning of formal relations between Bosnia and the EU and as the beginning of Bosnia's integration process. And I am proud of the role that I played, making it happen."*

The declaration in Luxembourg confirmed that "Bosnia and Herzegovina belongs in Europe" and established a joint task force to help it meet some of the prerequisites for closer cooperation with the EU. In 2000, Bosnia, alongside the other Western Balkan countries, became part of the EU's Stabilisation and Association Process.

In 2002-2003, Topcagic spent a year in Brussels as the deputy head of Bosnia's Mission to the EU.

*"I gained hands-on experience working with the European Commission, the Council, the Parliament, the people working in those institutions and the way things are done in Brussels. I got a deeper understanding of the EU itself, but also of the requirements that the candidate countries are faced with. For us, this was something completely new. I must say, when I came to Brussels, I still saw it all in rosy colours, the EU as a promised land and us somehow becoming better after doing some things, without having a clear idea what we had to do and how."*

Topcagic's stay in Brussels was cut short by the offer of a job that he now considers the most important and exciting of his professional career: director of Bosnia's Directorate for European Integration (DEI).

*"I did not think of myself as a possible candidate, but when the call came I was delighted. I accepted it whole-heartedly and without any hesitation. This was something you can have only once in your life."*

The Bosnian government established the DEI in 2003 at the recommendation of the European Commission, which had suggested replacing the previous Ministry of European Integration with a non-political structure headed by a civil servant. Topcagic was asked to set up the DEI and then officially selected as its first director. He inherited staff from the previous Ministry of European Integration, but tried to fill vacancies with young well-educated people who had studied abroad. He introduced modern management techniques and solicited outside advice – from Zagreb, Ljubljana and Brussels – on setting up the Directorate. The European Commission made between € 1.5 and 2 million available in technical assistance for the establishment of the DEI.

*“I felt a great responsibility how to spend that money, how to use it. After two years, I felt somebody would ask me, ‘How did you use it, what do you have now that you did not have before?’ My colleagues in Sarajevo and I thought a lot about what to ask for, what kind of technical assistance to ask for, how many permanent experts, how many short-term experts, which educational and professional background they should have, etc. This was something that our colleagues from Zagreb helped us define. I am happy now to be able to say that after the project was finished it was declared one of the best projects in the Western Balkans financed under CARDS [Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation].”*

In parallel to establishing the DEI, Topcagic pushed Bosnia along on the road to Europe.

*“This was a period of great enthusiasm. The establishment of the Directorate had been the last condition before conducting a feasibility study for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement [SAA]. During my visit in Brussels in March 2003, I was given a questionnaire. I remember there were 346 questions. It took us two weeks to translate them and decide which institutions should prepare the answers. Some institutions were reluctant to take on this duty. They were asking, ‘How shall we do it? Can we do it?’ We had been given little time to prepare the answers, but we did it. I also remember, the whole Council of Ministers, we went to Neum for a weekend to review the first set of 70 or 80 answers. We wanted to do a good job.”*

Following the submission of the questionnaire, the Commission held four meetings with Bosnian officials to review and clarify the answers and explain which steps Bosnia had to take next. The DEI then

prepared a “mini action plan”, which Prime Minister [Adnan Terzic](#) asked the responsible ministries and services to implement.

*“But the best push for our reform process was when the results of the feasibility study were announced in November 2003. They came with a list of 16 priority areas where significant progress was required before we could open SAA negotiations. And that was really the signal for an unprecedented mobilisation of resources in Bosnia. We operationalised the requirements and we arrived at a list of 45 or 46 laws that needed to be adopted, as well as some 27 institutions that needed to be established, upgraded or modified. It was really a big reform effort.”*

The SAA negotiations could finally be launched on 25 November 2005. This was a happy day in Topcagic’s life.

*“I remember the formal opening of the negotiations in Sarajevo. Olli Rehn came, the Commissioner for Enlargement. We had invited the Philharmonic Orchestra, and there were speeches at the beginning. The ceremony took place in the biggest room of our parliament building. It was full of people with smiles on their faces, a very nice and good atmosphere.”*

Topcagic had helped put together Bosnia’s negotiating team and make all the necessary preparations: the government had issued instructions for the flow of information and established mechanisms for coordination and cooperation between institutions at state and lower levels. The actual negotiations lasted one year, until the end of 2006. It was only in June 2008, however, that the SAA was signed. (The lack of [police reform](#) had held up the process.)

In late summer 2008, with his mandate as DEI director running out, Topcagic moved to Brussels to become Bosnia’s Ambassador to the EU, dealing with the implementation of the SAA and the visa liberalisation process. His current vision is for the main political parties in Bosnia – which face national elections in October 2010 – to agree on an “Agenda 2014”. This programme should be implemented over the coming years, regardless of who wins the elections.

*“2014 is symbolic, not only for Bosnia and Herzegovina, but for the whole of Europe. There is the idea that we should be at the end of the integration process – not only we, but the whole Western Balkans region – and we are grateful to Greek Prime Minister Papandreou for promoting it and to all those who are supporting it. But if this does not happen, Bosnia should have its own agenda 2014.”*

*I really believe that we have such qualities and capacities to do what is necessary. Let's define what we want, where we want to be. Really, a lot could be done and achieved – our own example of meeting the requirements for visa-free travel in the second half of last year proves this. It's not mission impossible. We should develop an ambitious agenda for ourselves." ■*