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EU-related narratives during the election campaign: Why Bosnia and Herzegovina needs stronger election preparedness

Bosnia and Herzegovina will hold General Elections on 4 October 2026, with the official election campaign beginning on 4 September. As the campaign begins, attention should be paid to how the European Union and Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession process are presented in political and public communication, given the importance of EU integration for the country's future and the reforms it is expected to undertake. The election period creates greater opportunities for inaccurate and misleading claims about the EU, accession requirements and reforms, as well as broader manipulative narratives, to gain visibility and influence public debate. Such narratives can distort citizens' understanding of Bosnia and Herzegovina's European path and turn the EU integration process into an instrument of electoral and political manipulation.

Ahead of the 2026 General Elections, UG „Zašto ne“ conducted a systematic mapping of EU-related disinformation claims and narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, drawing on the extensive databases of its political accountability and fact-checking platforms, Istinomjer and Raskrinkavanje. Both platforms looked into data published between 15.12.2022. and 15.7.2026. which included 791 analyses published by Istinomjer, and 2.403 published by Raskrinkavanje. During that time period, Raskrinkavanje rated more than 14.000 articles and social media posts, while Istinomjer rated more than 850 political statements.

The mapping looked at narratives documented over recent years in political discourse, media and social media, with the aim of identifying recurring patterns in how the EU, the accession process and related reforms have been portrayed.

Observations from Istinomjer's monitoring of political discourse show that EU integration was repeatedly instrumentalised in the domestic political arena. EU standards and accession requirements were inaccurately or misleadingly invoked to justify political positions, while responsibility for stalled reforms, lack of progress towards membership or access to EU funds was used to attack political opponents. At the same time, a broader set of narratives portrayed the EU and membership negatively, as declining, undemocratic or harmful to Bosnia and Herzegovina, or depicted the EU and the wider

West as actors deliberately working against domestic interests and applying double standards. These narratives included attempts to diminish the relevance or legitimacy of EU institutions and claims that membership could undermine Bosnia and Herzegovina's interests or autonomy. Other recurring claims questioned whether EU membership is achievable or worthwhile at all, while progress towards accession was sometimes portrayed primarily as the result of geopolitical interests rather than reforms and fulfilment of accession criteria.

Observations from Raskrinkavanje's fact-checking of media and social media content show some similar patterns, including narratives portraying EU institutions as undemocratic or illegitimate, European integration as a loss of sovereignty, and the accession process as endless or ultimately futile. The EU and the wider West were also depicted as hypocritical or hostile actors interfering in Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal affairs. A particularly prominent set of narratives portrayed the EU as an increasingly authoritarian project seeking greater control over citizens and different aspects of everyday life. These included conspiratorial claims about digital surveillance and control, health policies, restrictions on traditional ways of life, migration and family, as well as claims that EU digital and media regulation, including the Digital Services Act, is intended to impose censorship and restrict freedom of expression. Across these different topics, EU policies and initiatives were frequently presented as elements of a broader, coordinated agenda aimed at limiting individual freedoms, imposing social change and increasing control over citizens. These narratives often formed part of a wider illiberal discourse, intersecting with discriminatory rhetoric and hate speech directed at specific groups.

The role of online platforms

Large online platforms are an important part of the information environment in which the narratives identified above circulate and reach audiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This includes narratives originating outside the country and subsequently disseminated through social media to domestic audiences. The platforms' role in the distribution and amplification of such content, as well as the effectiveness of measures taken to address misleading and manipulative content, is therefore particularly relevant from the perspective of election integrity.

The implications are especially significant for young people, given the ways in which they access information and form their views about political and social issues. [Recent research](#) conducted by UG „Zašto ne“ among young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that social media and online portals are among their main sources of information, while 77.8% of respondents believe they encounter false, manipulated or misleading information online every day. At the same time, the findings point to considerable scepticism and uncertainty around EU membership and what it would mean for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Based on our previous monitoring experience, election campaigns usually provide fertile ground for the narratives identified above to be repeated, intensified or adapted to

electoral interests. In the coming weeks, Istinomjer and Raskrinkavanje will therefore closely follow how EU-related issues and narratives feature in the campaign.

Election integrity is also a European issue

Monitoring these narratives during the campaign is only one part of the response. Bosnia and Herzegovina enters the 2026 election period without many of the mechanisms that have become part of election preparedness within the EU and have also been used in some candidate countries, including established channels for cooperation and exchange with large online platforms when election-related risks emerge.

As an EU candidate country and part of a shared European information space, Bosnia and Herzegovina should be more closely connected to European efforts and mechanisms for election preparedness. The same platforms operate across borders, and misleading and manipulative narratives can move between countries. Protecting the integrity of elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina should therefore also form part of broader European efforts to strengthen democratic resilience.

The European Democracy Shield provides an opportunity to close some of these gaps. Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily through its relevant institutions, should actively engage with the initiative, strengthen cooperation among institutions, civil society, fact-checkers and media, and build stronger links with relevant EU institutions and European counterparts, including through cooperation with the relevant EDMO hub and other mechanisms for information exchange and election preparedness. The 2026 campaign should provide an impetus to begin this work now, rather than wait for the next election cycle.

One of the most important gaps to address is the absence of functioning communication and escalation channels with very large online platforms, including adequate capacity to respond to risks in the local information environment and languages. Relevant EU institutions can play an important role in supporting this process, connecting domestic stakeholders with existing expertise and mechanisms and helping establish more effective cooperation with platforms.

The 2026 campaign is likely to further demonstrate the gaps that need to be addressed to ensure stronger preparedness for future elections. Stronger domestic capacities, closer engagement with European mechanisms and functioning cooperation with online platforms are essential if Bosnia and Herzegovina is to respond more effectively to threats to election integrity.