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Leveraging the dairy sector and smallholders for agrifood systems transformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina



AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS IN ACTION STORIES
FROM EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

No.1

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¹ RADA is the Association of Agronomists and Tourism Experts of the Republic of Srpska. For more information, please see <https://uatrada.com/>



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INTRODUCTION

This publication² is part of a series highlighting practical examples of how countries are transforming their agrifood systems by aligning diverse policy priorities. Agrifood systems transformation requires more than isolated, sectorspecific reforms. The challenges shaping agrifood systems are closely interconnected across sectors, institutions and levels of governance. Progress therefore depends on stronger policy coherence, shared understanding and collaboration among government institutions, the private sector, civil society and local communities.

A systems approach helps guide this process. It is a way of thinking, acting and collaborating that recognizes the interconnections across all parts of agrifood systems. Its aim is to transform how these systems function so they can achieve multiple objectives simultaneously. This involves considering the full journey of food and agricultural products – from production and processing to marketing and consumption – while recognizing trade-offs and strengthening synergies across economic, environmental, social and health goals to ensure lasting benefits (FAO, 2025a). In this context, agrifood systems represent a critical entry point for advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This publication captures a pivotal moment in efforts by Bosnia and Herzegovina to transform its agrifood system amid the ongoing European Union accession process. Focusing on the dairy sector, this publication examines how policy, practice and local realities intersect in driving change on the ground. It highlights the complexity of aligning diverse policy priorities and offers insights from the country's journey towards a more coherent, inclusive and sustainable agrifood system.

² This publication was developed under FAO's support to governments in Europe and Central Asia to promote integrated and coherent agrifood systems transformation (TCP/RER/3904). The designations employed and the presentation of material in this information product do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) concerning the legal or development status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The mention of specific companies or products of manufacturers, whether or not these have been patented, does not imply that these have been endorsed or recommended by FAO in preference to others of a similar nature that are not mentioned.

1. THE FRAMING: A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

The country's experience shows that meaningful transformation requires more than isolated, sector-specific reforms. The challenges and opportunities shaping agrifood systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina are deeply interconnected across sectors, institutions and levels of governance. No single policy or actor can address them alone. Real progress depends on aligning policies, building a shared understanding and fostering collaboration among government institutions, the private sector and local communities to empower producers, applying a systems approach to guide change.

A systems approach is a way of thinking, acting and collaborating that recognizes the interconnections among agrifood system components. Its goal is to transform how these systems function to achieve and sustain multiple and interlinked objectives at scale. This means considering every step of the journey, from production

to consumption, to improve how food and agricultural products are produced, processed, marketed and consumed. It also requires managing trade-offs and enhancing synergies across economic, environmental, social and health goals to ensure that today's choices yield lasting benefits for future generations (FAO, 2025a).

For the smallholders featured in this publication, such as Dražena Kalaba and the Erceg family, success depends not only on personal initiative and adaptability but also on coherent and coordinated support that enables them to diversify, innovate and thrive in a changing environment. Bosnia and Herzegovina is gradually putting systems principles into practice – aligning policies through the European Union accession process, strengthening institutional linkages and supporting producers as active partners in transformation.

2. AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Bosnia and Herzegovina is an upper-middle-income country with approximately 3.2 million inhabitants and a low population density. Its decentralized governance structure includes state-level institutions, the governments of the two entities – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska – and the autonomous Brčko District. In recent years, Bosnia and Herzegovina has taken important steps forward. In December 2022, it was granted European Union candidate status, opening the door for structural reforms and new market opportunities. Just over a year later, in March 2024, the European Council opened accession negotiations (European Commission, 2025a).

Agriculture remains a vital pillar of the country's economy and society. Although its contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) declined from 5.5 percent in 2019 to 4.7 percent in 2023 – below the Western Balkans average of 8.4 percent – the sector is crucial for many households (OECD, 2024). Around half of the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina live in rural areas, and agriculture provides direct employment to roughly 20 percent of the country's population (World Bank, 2026). Around 90 percent of agricultural workers are informally employed, reflecting the sector's role as a supplementary income source, especially for low-income families.

Agrifood systems governance

The country's agrifood system is governed through a highly decentralized structure, as signed in the Dayton Peace Agreement. Responsibilities are distributed across four main levels: the state (Council of Ministers), the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Srpska and the Brčko District. In the Republic of Srpska, authority is divided between the republican and local levels. In contrast, governance in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina includes an additional layer: ten autonomous cantons with their own governments that influence both federation- and state-level decisions (N1 Sarajevo, 2024). Together, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska oversee 143 municipalities (World Bank, 2022)³.

Given the country's five presidents, 13 prime ministers, 136 ministries and 700-plus parliamentarians, coordinating agrifood-related policies across this administrative landscape is both complex and essential (FAO, 2025b).

While the country's governance structure is uniquely layered, other European countries offer relevant experience with multilevel, decentralized or asymmetric governance. For example, as does Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belgium operates under a federal model shaped by linguistic and regional divisions, with power-sharing across federal, regional and community levels. Germany has a federal structure in which 16 states (Länder) hold constitutional authority over areas such as education, agriculture and law enforcement.

³ See a visualization at https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Municipalities_and_regions_of_Bosnia_and_Herzegovina.svg

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, agriculture is mainly governed at the entity level because the national constitution does not explicitly assign agricultural policy and regulation to the state (national) government. This means that each of the two entities – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska – has its own separate legal framework and institutions for managing agriculture.

Correspondingly, agricultural policy development, implementation and budget management fall under the authority of the respective entity ministries: the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Management and Forestry in the Republic of Srpska and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Each ministry operates independently within its jurisdiction, shaping agricultural programmes, regulations and support measures according to entity-level priorities.

At the state level, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations plays a key coordinating role related to policy formulation, interventions and the harmonization of entity plans with those of international institutions. Within this ministry, the following bodies operate as administrative organizations: the Veterinary Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina; the Administration of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Plant Health Protection; and the Office for Harmonization and Coordination of Payment Systems in Agriculture, Nutrition and Rural Development of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations, 2024). The Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations also oversees the alignment of the country's policies with the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy, manages foreign trade in agricultural products, and facilitates access to European Union pre-accession assistance.



3. INTERCONNECTED DRIVERS OF TRANSFORMATION

The country's agrifood systems transformation agenda is shaped by a set of interlinked priorities that reflect its social, economic and environmental realities. These drivers – ranging from rural revitalization to climate resilience – are deeply connected and require coherent and intersectoral policy responses.

Revitalizing rural communities and retaining youth:

Rural areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina face infrastructure gaps, limited public services, school closures and education systems that are misaligned with local economic sectors such as agriculture, forestry and tourism. The related outmigration of young people, combined with low birth rates, is accelerating demographic decline and placing growing strain on the rural labour force (FAO, 2025b). Although these issues are recognized in policy in both the Republic of Srpska⁴ and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina,⁵ progress is slow due to limited financing and the low electoral weight of rural communities.

Reducing import dependency and boosting competitiveness:

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a net food importer, largely due to high production costs and low yields (FAO, 2025b). However, sectors such as fruit and dairy hold strong export potential. A major challenge is aligning with European Union standards (OECD, 2024), particularly in veterinary regulations and disease control. Pesticide use is another concern, as regulation remains weak and pesticides containing substances not approved in the European Union

are widely available. Adapting national legislation is progressing slowly, including the need to adjust to the European Union's frequent updates to its list of approved substances.

Promoting gender equality and women's economic participation:

Women face multiple barriers in engaging in agriculture, with the nature of these barriers varying across entities. These include limited land ownership; unequal access to credit, training and extension services; and traditional gender roles (FAO and UN Women, 2021). Currently, 18 percent of farms in Bosnia and Herzegovina are managed by women, below the European Union average (32 percent) but higher than some larger European Union agricultural economies, such as Germany (11 percent) and the Kingdom of the Netherlands (6 percent). Approximately 38 percent of women own or co-own agricultural land, which is roughly in line with the European Union average (EU CAP Network, 2022). While Bosnia and Herzegovina has made progress in gender equality in education, health and political participation, female labour-force participation remains low (World Bank and The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2024).

⁴ For more information, please see <https://vladars.rs/sr-SP-Cyrl/Vlada/Ministarstva/mpb/Pages/default.aspx>

⁵ For more information, please see <https://fbihvlada.gov.ba/>

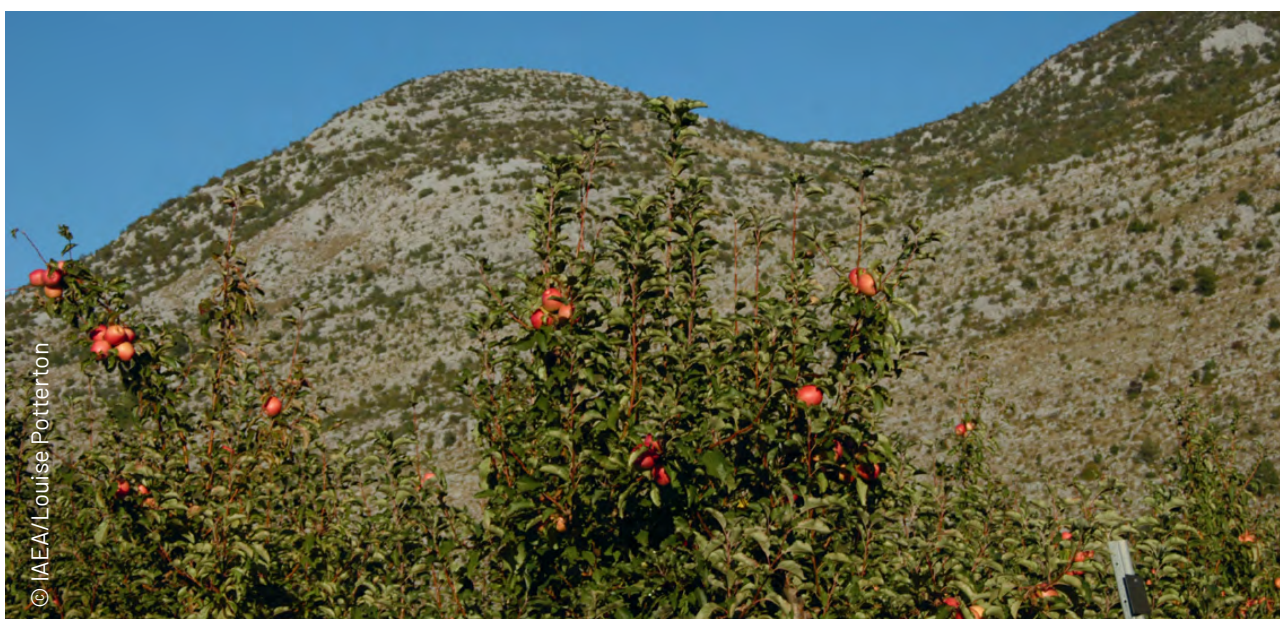
Addressing nutrition and promoting healthy diets:

Rising obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are a growing concern in Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting broader regional trends (FAO, 2023). Currently, 9.6 percent of boys and 6.3 percent of girls aged 5–9 years in Bosnia and Herzegovina are living with obesity (World Health Organization, 2024). Rates of overweight and obesity are rising across all age groups (children, adolescents and adults), contributing to an increase in NCDs such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes. These now account for approximately 80 percent of annual deaths in the country (World Health Organization, 2018). Recognizing these challenges, both the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina have identified nutrition as a priority within health and education policies, introducing measures such as child nutrition programmes and, in the Republic of Srpska, a rulebook on healthy eating in preschools. However, nutrition remains largely siloed within these sectors and

is notably absent from the country's Strategic Plan for Rural Development 2023–2027 and related subnational action plans, limiting the potential for broader, intersectoral action.

Responding to climate change and ensuring environmental sustainability:

Bosnia and Herzegovina is increasingly exposed to climate risks, including floods, droughts and extreme weather events. These risks pose significant threats to agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods, especially among smallholders. Without targeted action, climate impacts could reduce the country's GDP by up to 14 percent by 2050, with floods causing most of the impact (World Bank, 2024a). Environmental degradation further exacerbates these vulnerabilities. Approximately 6 percent of the country's land is currently affected by unsustainable practices such as illegal resource extraction, mining, intensive agriculture and a growing frequency of natural disasters, including wildfires (FAO, 2025b).



4. A ROAD MAP FOR CHANGE: EUROPEAN UNION ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS

The *Strategic Plan for Rural Development 2023–2027*, along with related strategies at the entity, cantonal (in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) and local (in the Republic of Srpska) levels, provides the framework for the country's agrifood systems transformation agenda (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2023). Collectively, these strategies articulate a vision for a competitive, modern and climate-resilient agrifood system. Key policy priorities include enhancing productivity, strengthening market orientation, fostering innovation, promoting sustainable resource use and revitalizing rural areas, especially to retain young people.⁶

This transformation is strongly influenced by broader policy processes, most notably the European Union accession negotiations, which steer the country's reform and investment priorities. As a European Union candidate, Bosnia and Herzegovina must align its legislation with the European Union *acquis*, the comprehensive body of European Union law organized into 35 negotiation chapters across six thematic clusters. Several of these chapters are especially relevant to agrifood systems transformation.

Chapter 11 on agriculture and rural development requires that Bosnia and Herzegovina fully align its entire agriculture and rural development system – including policies, institutions, financial controls and legal frameworks – with the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy. Chapter 12 focuses on food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policies, covering crucial areas such as animal and plant health, microbiological risks, pesticide residues and food traceability – key for enabling the country's access to the European Union market. Chapter 27 addresses environment and climate change, emphasizing the adoption of legislation aligned with the European Union. In addition, Chapter 19 on social policy and employment addresses rural employment and working conditions.

Despite ongoing reform efforts, the 2024 European Union accession report notes that progress across these chapters remains limited, delaying the country's full alignment with European Union requirements and access to key European Union financial instruments (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2024). Notably, Bosnia and Herzegovina has yet to receive accreditation for Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for Rural Development (IPARD) funds. This European Union programme supports the modernization of farms and agribusinesses, rural infrastructure, and environmental and climate-related measures (European Commission, 2026a).

⁶ The strategy is available online on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations of Bosnia and Herzegovina at <https://www.mvteo.gov.ba/Content/Read/poljoprivreda-prehrana-sumarstvo-ruralni-razvoj-zakoni-i-propisi?lang=en>

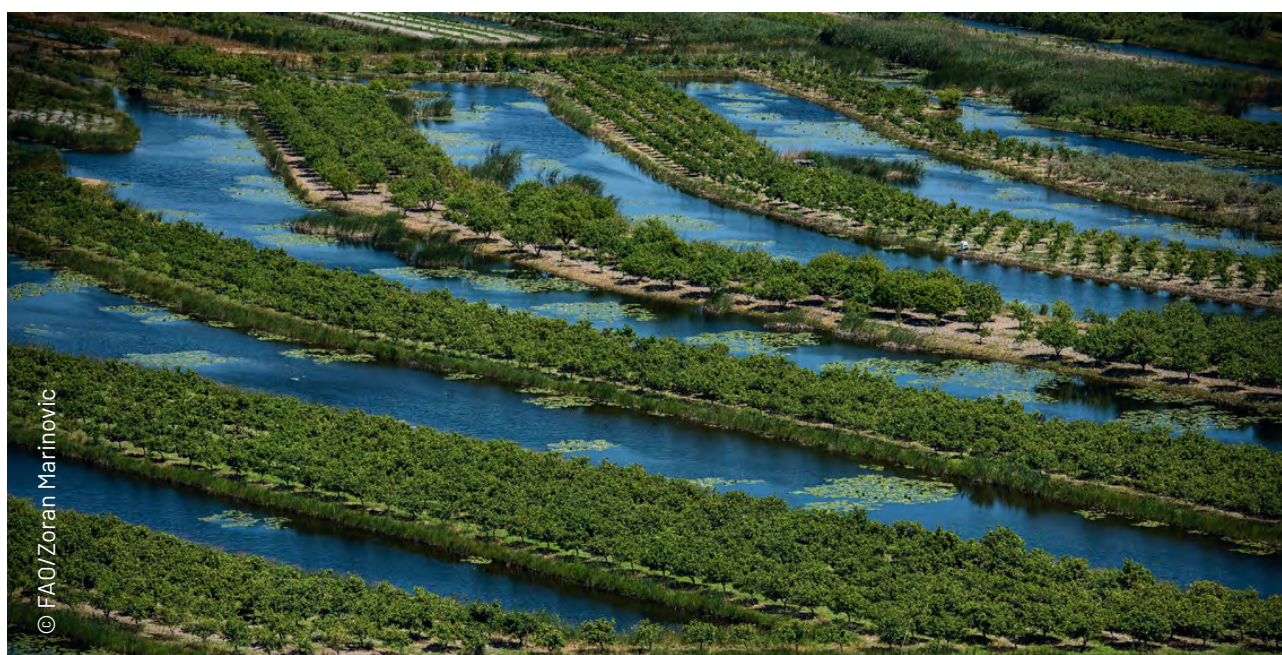
The Green Deal as a catalyst for policy alignment

The European Union Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy are increasingly shaping the expectations tied to these chapters, raising the bar for sustainability, biosecurity standards and climate action throughout the enlargement process. At its core, the Green Deal is a unifying vision that links economic growth, environmental protection, food security and social inclusion. By setting long-term targets for climate neutrality, resource efficiency and biodiversity protection, it provides direction and incentives for policy coherence across sectors that often have operated separately (European Commission, 2026b). For Bosnia and Herzegovina, this means future alignment with stricter standards on resource efficiency, biodiversity, emissions reduction and sustainable food production (Lorenzen, 2022).

A concrete example is the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), set to be gradually

implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina starting 1 January 2026. CBAM will impose a carbon price on certain imports to level the playing field between European Union producers who already face carbon costs and foreign producers who do not. This will directly affect the country's carbon-intensive industries, such as steel, cement and aluminium (World Bank, 2024b). While agriculture is not explicitly included in the initial phase, the inclusion of fertilizers could indirectly impact agrifood systems by increasing input costs. Although the precise implications for agriculture remain uncertain, CBAM may create incentives to adopt more sustainable practices (Šelmić *et al.*, 2024).

More broadly, the Green Deal helps Bosnia and Herzegovina move beyond compliance towards greater coherence, encouraging the alignment of agricultural, trade and environmental policies under a shared vision of sustainable development (Teevan, Medinilla and Sergejeff, 2021).



5. THE DAIRY SECTOR AS A STRATEGIC LEVER FOR AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

The dairy sector, deeply embedded in the country's culture and rural economy, offers a strategic entry point for agrifood systems transformation and policy alignment. The milk supply has grown since 2016, and the value of domestic dairy production is projected to grow from approximately EUR 187 million in 2023 to EUR 196 million by 2028 (ReportLinker, 2026). The sector connects directly to national priorities such as agricultural modernization, rural revitalization, social equity and climate goals, as outlined in the Strategic Plan for Rural Development 2023–2027.

A backbone of rural life, culture and diets

Dairy plays a central role in the country's rural economy, food culture and diets. With an estimated 20 000 smallholder dairy farms nationwide, the sector forms the backbone of many rural communities. Typical smallholders keep around five cows, while medium-sized family farms manage 15 to 20. A growing but still limited number of specialized family farms manage 40 to 60 cows, representing an emerging segment within the dairy sector.

With annual per capita milk consumption around 200 litres, dairy products are both a dietary staple and a key part of cultural identity. Traditional dairy products such as *Vlašićki*, *Travnički* and *Livanjski* cheeses, *Kajmak/Skorup* (a creamy spread), *Sir iz mješine* and *Sir za pitu* (a soft cheese used in Balkan pies) – but also fermented milk, yoghurt, kefir and fresh milk – are deeply woven

into the cultural heritage. While artisanal cheesemaking thrives in many rural communities, milk production remains the main source of income and the foundation of the sector.

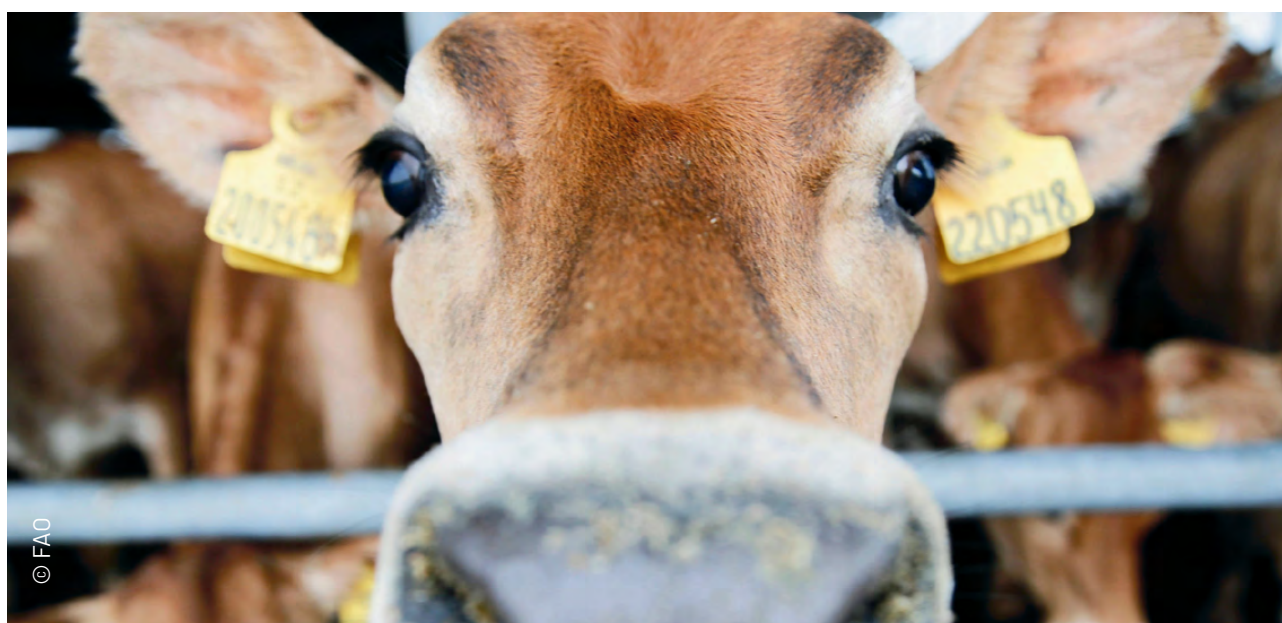
Dairy products are a key part of diets across Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the 2017 national dietary survey among adults, approximately 85 percent of respondents reported daily consumption of dairy products such as milk, cheese and yoghurt, with high-fat varieties being the most prevalent (Food Safety Agency of Bosnia, Herzegovina *et al.*, 2021). The survey also identified broader dietary patterns characterized by low intakes of nutrient-rich fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy, fish, and nuts and seeds, alongside higher intakes of processed meats and refined grains. These patterns were reflected in a low average Prime Diet Quality Score (Gicevic *et al.*, 2019).

6. NAVIGATING VULNERABILITIES AND EXTERNAL SHOCKS

Since 2013, the dairy sector has experienced significant disruptions following the accession of Croatia to the European Union, which entailed the alignment of food safety and veterinary standards with European Union requirements. As Bosnia and Herzegovina had not yet harmonized its regulations with those standards, the country lost access to Croatia, a key export market, which had previously absorbed 60–70 percent of its milk production (Jukic, 2014a). Subsequent shocks, including the removal of European Union milk quotas and the Russian Federation ban on European Union dairy imports, created a surplus of European Union dairy products, which entered the Bosnia and Herzegovina market at low prices (Jukic, 2015). Domestic milk prices fell sharply – often to below production costs – forcing many farmers out of business and triggering nationwide

protests over the lack of protection for local producers (Jukic, 2014b).

Today, the country's dairy sector meets only about half of domestic demand, with imported products dominating supermarket shelves. In 2022, dairy imports totalled approximately USD 123.3 million, contributing to a USD 61 million trade deficit (Stanojcic, 2023). Although agricultural strategies at various levels emphasize the need to boost domestic production and reduce import dependence, the range of available policy instruments remain limited. Trade obligations under the Central European Free Trade Agreement and the European Union Stabilization and Association Agreement constrain the use of tariffs and quotas, leaving subsidies as the primary support mechanism – though their rates and consistency vary by entity.⁷



⁷ In 2024, milk producers received approximately 0.40–0.42 KM/L in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and 0.28 KM/L in the Republic of Srpska, where payments are generally more consistent. Both entities also offer capital investment support – 33 percent in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and 40–50 percent in the Republic of Srpska – with additional incentives for women, youth and high-altitude farmers. The Republic of Srpska also provides per-cow subsidies and financial incentives for participation in milk recording systems.



7. PATH TOWARDS EUROPEAN UNION INTEGRATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND TRADE-OFFS

Trade liberalization and foreign investment in dairy: balancing growth and inclusion

The country's strategic location in Southeastern Europe, combined with competitive land prices and a relatively smaller agricultural sector with comparatively lower overall emissions, is attracting increasing interest from multinational companies and European Union-based farmers. Many have already established operations in the country, often securing state-owned land through concession agreements.

Today, multinational firms control an increasing share of milk processing in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They purchase significant volumes of raw milk from local producers, though in some cases they also import condensed, powdered or raw milk to meet demand unmet by domestic supply. These companies play a leading role in dairy exports, contribute to compliance with international standards, and bring technical expertise and innovation (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Water Management and Forestry, 2023; Glavić, Zenunović and Budiša, 2017). When effectively integrated, these contributions can benefit the broader sector, including smallholders, by improving quality and competitiveness (Jalić *et al.*, 2022).

However, this trend also presents important trade-offs. While multinational processors generate employment

and contribute to the tax base, their operations may not always align with broader public policy objectives such as inclusive employment, social equity, environmental sustainability or rural revitalization. Without appropriate domestic policies and safeguards, their growing influence may deepen existing inequalities and accelerate the decline of small-scale farms.

As Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to liberalize trade in alignment with European Union accession requirements, its dairy market is increasingly exposed to price dynamics in larger European Union dairy-producing countries. This downward pressure on domestic milk prices threatens the sustainability of local producers – particularly smallholders. As small-scale producers struggle to compete, many are leaving the sector, contributing to rural depopulation.

Trade openness and emerging animal health risks

As Bosnia and Herzegovina works to expand trade and strengthen market opportunities, maintaining vigilance and robust veterinary controls remain essential to preventing and managing exposure to transboundary animal diseases. Recent cases of such diseases in several European countries – including bluetongue in Germany (Friedrich-Loeffler-Institut, 2025) and Austria (Reuters, 2024); foot-and-

mouth disease in Germany, Slovakia and Hungary (Gomez, 2025); enzootic bovine leukosis in Romania (Pricop, 2025); lumpy skin disease in Italy and France (Badara, 2025); and anthrax in Croatia (Šušak, 2025) – highlight the importance of further enhancing the country's veterinary and food safety systems in line with European Union standards.

The European Commission's 2024 progress report acknowledges gains on these issues but emphasizes the need for stronger coordination between state and entity-level authorities, as well as improvements in disease surveillance, animal identification, hygiene standards and veterinary inspections. Advancing these areas will strengthen the country's export potential – particularly for live animals and meat products (excluding poultry) – and accelerate progress towards European Union accession.

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina is technically authorized to export raw milk to the European Union, such exports remain minimal despite strong demand from neighbouring markets such as Croatia. This is due less to formal trade barriers and more to a combination of economic and logistical constraints. The Veterinary Office and dairy processors often encourage retaining milk within the country to support domestic processing and reduce import dependence – an approach that, while beneficial for local industry, can limit farmers' bargaining power and pricing flexibility. Additionally, inadequate cold chain infrastructure and the absence of targeted export incentives further discourage raw milk exports, even though national safety standards are being met (Abas, 2024).

Smallholders facing the greatest risks

Smallholder dairy farmers in Bosnia and Herzegovina are particularly vulnerable to market pressures and climate-related shocks. Those producing less than 200 litres of milk per day often receive prices up to 20 percent lower than larger producers, and these prices frequently fall below production costs. This pricing system favours larger farms, leaving smallholders with limited incomes and thus access to affordable credit or insurance. These challenges restrict their ability to invest in modernization and practices to support climate resilience.

These constraints increase smallholders' exposure to price volatility, disease outbreaks and extreme weather. According to the Dairy Farmers' Association of the Republic of Srpska, milk production among small, often-ageing farmers has declined sharply, while an increasing share of national output is now concentrated among a few large-scale producers.

Fostering inclusive agrifood systems: the role of geographical indication protection and producer organizations

To support rural revitalization and support smallholders, Bosnia and Herzegovina is strengthening the protection of geographical indications (GIs) for traditional dairy products. The country has established a legal framework and a national GI register aligned with European Union legislation. Several cheeses – such as Livno cheese (Livanjski sir), Gacko kajmak from the sack (Gatački Kajmak iz mješine), Majevisa smoked cheese

Zarac (Majevički dimljeni sir Zarac), Repovac cheese (Repovački sir) and Travnik cheese (Travnički sir) have been granted national protected designation of origin status (Food Safety Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2026). Livno cheese also has been officially recognized and protected through the European Union's GI register, becoming the first food product from the Western Balkans to receive European Union-level protection (Press and information team of the Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2024).

While GI status can enhance product value, increase visibility in European Union markets and boost smallholder incomes, its full transformative potential depends on strong institutional support to help producers meet strict standards for quality, traceability and marketing (European Commission,

2025b). In the European Union, producer organizations play a key role in this process by coordinating certification, collective branding and market access.

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina has numerous registered agricultural associations and cooperatives, it currently lacks formally recognized producer organizations under national legislation and has yet to adopt European Union-aligned laws governing their establishment and operation. Advancing this framework is crucial, as the European Union formally recognizes producer organizations and provides targeted financial and technical support through instruments such as IPARD and the Common Agricultural Policy – benefits that become accessible only once national legislation is harmonized with European Union standards.

8. ALIGNING POLICY AGENDAS IN PRACTICE AMID EUROPEAN UNION ACCESSION: INSIGHTS FROM SMALLHOLDERS

In a complex economic and political landscape, smallholders in Bosnia and Herzegovina are finding ways to sustain and grow their businesses. This publication shares two stories – one of a family-run dairy farm⁸ (Redakcija, 2019) and another of a women-led cheese enterprise⁹ – that showcase how small producers are successfully adapting to evolving regulations and dynamic market conditions.

A family farm's journey

In the village of Brestovčina near Gradiška, Milena Erceg and her husband, Goran, have spent more than two decades building a family-run dairy farm from scratch. When they started in 2002, they had just a few cows and produced 20 litres of milk per day. Today, they manage a herd of 37 Holstein and Simmental cows, delivering over 500 litres daily to Mlijekoprodukt, which is part of the Serbian dairy group Imlek owned by the investment firm Mid Europa Partners from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Mlijekoprodukt, 2026).

In recent years, Milena also began producing her own cheese, including her signature variety, called “Four Tastes in One”. Their two sons actively help run the 35 ha farm, where wheat and corn also are cultivated using sustainable practices such as crop rotation. Beyond farming, Milena is also a renowned photographer.

The early years were tough. Just a few years after the war, when city wages were low and jobs scarce, Milena and Goran made the bold decision to leave their urban lives behind and start dairy farming. They took out loans to buy heifers imported from northern Europe – a move that brought both hope and hardship. The process involved long quarantine clearances and unexpected disease outbreaks. The imported heifers were infected with *Trichophyton verrucosum*, commonly known as cattle ringworm. In those early days, Milena and Goran produced only about 20 litres of milk a day, which they personally delivered 10 km to the nearest collection point. But their determination paid off. Today, they participate in the European Union-aligned milk recording system, enhancing their breeding and milk quality. Proceeds from the farm have enabled investments in a modern barn, new machinery and a new family home. As legislation evolved, Milena and Goran adapted to new requirements such as mandatory ear tagging for livestock.

⁸ The information used here is from a personal interview conducted in June 2025 and from online sources such as AgroSavjet (AgroSavjet, 2019a).

⁹ This publication is based on a personal interview conducted in June 2025 and in online sources such as AgroSavjet (AgroSavjet, 2019b) and EU4Agri (EU4Agri, 2026). [10] For more information, please visit <https://tropic.ba>

While they diligently comply with these regulations introduced by the Government of Republika Srpska, they are not fully aware that such measures are part of the country's broader alignment with European Union standards.

Looking to the future with caution

Living just kilometres from the border with Croatia, Milena witnessed firsthand how European Union accession challenged small Croatian farmers. Many struggled to compete with larger producers who benefited from better prices and economies of scale; because of the increased competition, most were forced to shut down their businesses, leading to widespread market consolidation and the exit of many smallholders (European Economic and Social Committee, 2024). Milena fears a similar path could unfold for small farms in Bosnia and Herzegovina unless their unique contributions are acknowledged and supported.

Still, Milena remains optimistic.

"FEWER PEOPLE STAY IN VILLAGES NOW, BUT I BELIEVE THERE'S ALWAYS A PLACE FOR SMALL PRODUCERS," she says.

"ESPECIALLY FOR OUR TRADITIONAL PRODUCTS, LIKE OUR CHEESES."

Milena and Goran envision expanding the farm's potential through agrotourism and by supplying local schools with fresh cheese and milk. However, restrictive state-level public procurement laws currently block local producers from selling to schools, limiting opportunities for short supply chains. Unlike several European Union countries that support preferential purchasing from local farms, the country's procurement

laws are both restrictive and poorly harmonized across different levels of government. This disconnect between policymaking and community realities undermines smallholders' ability to diversify their markets.

Leadership and legacy

As president of the Women's Section in the Dairy Farmers' Association of the Republic of Srpska, Milena actively advocates for the role of women in the dairy sector.

"I AM PROUD OF EVERYTHING WE'VE BUILT," she says.

"WE STARTED WITH NOTHING. NOW I TELL MY SONS TO STAY IN THE VILLAGE. LIFE HERE IS HEALTHIER – AND WITH HARD WORK, YOU CAN BUILD SOMETHING REAL."

A women-led cheese enterprise

In the quiet village of Podrašnica near Mrkonjić Grad, a small cheese dairy is helping strengthen the local rural economy. Sirana Podrašnica was established in 2020 by a team of three women with the aim of revitalizing local food production and creating new opportunities in a region long affected by outmigration.

Every day, the team processes between 200 and 250 litres of fresh milk from local farms into a selection of semihard and hard cheeses. Their specialties include cheeses flavoured with paprika, garlic, basil, oregano and rosemary. Most of their products are delivered to Banja Luka, where they are sold through the Tropic retail chain.¹⁰ Behind the scenes, a part-time milk collector supports their work, while founder Dražena Kalaba, a trained technologist, oversees production and quality control.

¹⁰ For more information, please visit <https://tropic.ba>

The early days presented many challenges. Sourcing a steady supply of milk was difficult at first, as many small farmers had left the area, often relocating when their children began school in urban centres or abroad. Once supply stabilized, another obstacle emerged: getting their cheeses recognized.

"AT FIRST, NO ONE KNEW US," DRAŽENA RECALLS. "SO WE PACKED UP OUR PRODUCTS, WENT TO FOOD FESTIVALS AND BEGAN SELLING ONLINE."

Slowly but steadily, they built a loyal customer base.

Adapting and building a rural business together

Sirana Podrašnica was founded through a collaborative local effort. The municipality of Mrkonjić Grad contributed more than KM 76 000 (about USD 46 000) to help launch the dairy. Additional support came from the Republic of Srpska Investment-Development Bank and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water. These investments enabled the purchase of essential equipment and the creation of a modern processing facility that meets national food safety standards.

This effort has had a meaningful local impact – creating jobs for women, strengthening local supply chains and supporting traditional food production in a region with limited economic opportunities.

As part of the country's gradual alignment with European Union regulations, new requirements – such as updated packaging standards – have been introduced by the Republic of Srpska Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management. However, Dražena is not fully aware that these changes are linked to European Union

accession efforts; she simply views them as part of doing business in an evolving regulatory environment.

"IF IT MEANS ACCESSING MORE MARKETS," SHE SAYS, "ESPECIALLY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION, WE'RE READY TO ADAPT."

For Dražena, European Union integration is not a threat but an opportunity to grow. She is particularly focused on connecting with the Bosnian diaspora in Austria and Germany. Since 2012, many families from her region have migrated in search of work – and now, from afar, they are asking for a taste of home. "They miss the flavours they grew up with," she says.

She believes there is a strong emotional bond between diaspora communities and traditional food. With the right packaging, reliable logistics and compliance with European Union food safety standards, Sirana Podrašnica could eventually begin selling abroad – whether through online platforms, ethnic food shops or diaspora-run restaurants.

"We're not afraid of the big producers," Dražena says. "We offer something else – cheese that is local, handmade and full of character. That's our advantage."

Expansion plans are already underway. Production is set to increase to 700 litres per day, and the dairy will soon welcome three new team members from the village, including a driver to deliver cheese to markets in Banja Luka, roughly an hour away.

A steady success

Reflecting on the journey, Dražena speaks with pride.

"YOU DON'T HAVE TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY TO SUCCEED," SHE SAYS. "IF YOU WORK HARD AND FACE EACH CHALLENGE AS IT COMES, YOU CAN BUILD SOMETHING LASTING RIGHT HERE."

9. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The stories of Dražena and the Erceg family go beyond individual resilience and entrepreneurship. They demonstrate that aligning policy agendas requires more than high-level policymaking. Strategic frameworks are essential, but real transformation happens when policies connect across sectors to create the right conditions for smallholders to thrive.

For producers like Dražena and the Ercegs, success depends on navigating a complex environment of shifting markets, evolving regulations and demographic pressures. Their experiences reflect broader trends shaping the country's agrifood system:

- **Innovation amid uncertainty.** Smallholders continue to innovate despite evolving regulations, shifting markets, economic fragility, demographic decline and a shrinking rural workforce, demonstrating their vital role in the sector's transformation.
- **Women leading change.** Women such as Milena and Dražena are reshaping gender roles, leading production and community initiatives that retain youth, preserve food traditions and create jobs in a traditionally male-dominated field.
- **Adapting to new standards.** Both enterprises have adjusted to changing regulations – from milk recording and animal tagging to updated packaging standards – though the link to the country's European Union accession process remains unclear to

them. For both, compliance is seen as essential to sustaining growth and competitiveness.

- **Diversification as resilience.** Economic survival increasingly depends on diversification through agritourism, artisanal products, school meal programmes and diaspora marketing, underscoring the need for coordinated and intersectoral support.
- **Inclusive integration.** While European Union accession promises broader markets and investment, benefits risk being uneven unless smaller producers are explicitly included in transformation policies and investments.

Agrifood systems transformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is driven by policy priorities such as rural revitalization, social equity, climate resilience, trade competitiveness and European Union alignment. Balancing competitiveness with inclusion, liberalization with protection, and modernization with rural identity requires coherence, collaboration and continuous learning.

Policy alignment – both within the European Union accession process and across domestic agendas – is a continuous journey. Moving from vision to impact will require strong coordination among sectors and levels of government and a clear recognition of the interconnections among agriculture, trade, gender, environment and rural development. Smallholders remain central to this journey. The experiences of Dražena and the Erceg family show how rural producers contribute to the country's agrifood

systems transformation by preserving tradition, adapting to change and strengthening community resilience.

Ultimately, the success of agrifood systems transformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina will be measured not only by regulatory compliance or market growth but also by the vitality of its rural communities and the capacity of producers such as Dražena and the Erceg family to adapt and lead change locally.



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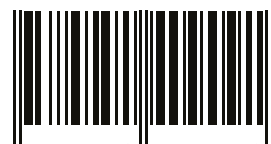
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