

FOREF: Balkan Leadership Conference 2026: Media Freedom as the Foundation for Democracy

Peter Zoehrer
July 14, 2026

Balkan Leadership Conference 2026: Media Freedom as the Foundation for Democracy and Economic Bridges in the Western Balkans

Reflections from Tirana on Rebuilding Trust, Strengthening Ethical Journalism, and Choosing Cooperation Over Division

PETER ZOEHRER
JUL 14





REA
D IN
APP
↗



Tirana’s historic Parliament comes alive as leaders, journalists, and policymakers from across the Western Balkans gather for the 2026 Balkan Leadership Conference on media freedom, democracy, and building regional bridges.

Tirana, June 26, 2026 — The historic Albanian Parliament hosted the Balkan Leadership Conference (BLC2026) under the theme “Media Freedom, Democracy & Digital Governance in the Western Balkans.” Convened under the auspices of the Albanian Parliament and the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), with partners including IMAP, the Washington Times Foundation, Dajti Express and others, the event united parliamentarians, journalists, regulators and civil society leaders from across the Western Balkans. Moderated by Hon. Klajda Gjoshaj, the programme featured opening remarks, two focused panels, audience interaction via Slido, the Ceremony of Recognition and ‘Ambassador of Peace’ Awards, and closing reflections. Discussions confronted the region’s information challenges while spotlighting

media’s power to build — or destroy — trust, accountability and cooperation.

Opening Session: Interdependence, Responsibility and the Balkans’ Unique Contribution

Mr. Jacques Marion, International Vice President of UPF and President of UPF Europe & Middle East, opened by recalling more than two decades of UPF engagement in the Balkans and Albania’s status as host to the largest network of Peace Ambassadors in Europe. He referenced Dr. Hak Ja Han’s 2019 message in Tirana that the Balkans can make a distinctive contribution to the European Union.

Thanks for reading! Subscribe for free to receive new posts and support my work.

Pledge your support



Jacques Marion, President of UPF Europe & Middle East, delivers powerful opening remarks at BLC2026 in Tirana, urging media to choose bridges over division.

Marion presented UPF’s vision through three ideals — **interdependence, mutual prosperity and universal values** — and placed media at their heart:

“In a world increasingly marked by conflict and polarization, the media helps shape whether societies move toward peace or division. This is why the theme of this conference is so timely and important.”

He stressed that freedom implies responsibility and that this responsibility becomes even more vital in the age of artificial intelligence. Drawing on personal experience in countries where press freedom is restricted, he observed how such limitations shape perceptions of war and peace, while in freer environments media can lose trust when seen as taking sides. He asked what the Western Balkans can contribute to the EU and answered:

“Perhaps the region’s greatest contribution lies in its experience of diversity,

resilience, and reconciliation... Having faced the challenges of coexistence in tragic circumstances, the peoples of the Balkans possess valuable lessons about dialogue, mutual respect, and the building of inclusive societies.”

Hon. Klajda Gjoshaj welcomed participants and noted the timely alignment with the International Day of Parliamentarism, framing media freedom, democratic institutions and economic cooperation as interconnected pillars.



Hon. Klajda Gjoshaj, former Minister of European Integration (2013–2017) and Chair of IAPP Albania, moderates BLC2026 in Tirana with sharp focus on media freedom and regional cooperation.

Panel I: The Information Paradox, Journalist Safety and Democratic Resilience

The first panel addressed how to strengthen media freedom and pluralism against digital platforms, algorithms and cross-border flows. Panellists included **Dr. Iris Luarasi**, **Hon. Danijela Djurovic**, **Hon. Enver Hoxhaj**, **Hon. Armela Krasniqi**, **Hon. Jovan Jovanovic** and **Mr. Aleksander Cipa**.

Hon. Danijela Djurovic, former President of the Parliament of Montenegro, argued that the deeper challenge is not merely the availability of information but citizens’ ability to distinguish fact from manipulation:

“The topic we are discussing today is not only about media. It is about the quality of our democracies. It is about trust. And ultimately, it is about the future of the Western Balkans.”

She highlighted how information in the region shapes political behaviour, deepens divisions and influences elections. While digital technologies have democratised access, they have created new vulnerabilities. Investigative journalists face economic pressures,

political influence and SLAPPs — lawsuits whose true purpose ***“is often not to seek justice... [but] to intimidate journalists, exhaust financial resources, discourage investigations, and create a climate of fear and self-censorship.”***

Social media algorithms, she noted, ***“are not designed to promote truth, accuracy, or democratic dialogue. They are designed to maximize engagement. And unfortunately, outrage, fear, and conflict often generate more engagement than facts, moderation, or careful analysis.”*** Artificial intelligence compounds the difficulty:

“The question is no longer whether AI will influence public discourse. It already does. The real question is whether democratic institutions can adapt quickly enough to ensure that technology strengthens democracy rather than undermines it.”

Her three priorities were clear: strengthen independent journalism as a safeguard against corruption and backsliding; strengthen democratic institutions so that ***“trust cannot be demanded. It must be earned through transparency, accountability, competence, and integrity”***; and invest seriously in media and digital literacy, especially among young people. Challenges cross borders, she concluded, so responses must too. Media freedom is ***“a democratic issue... a governance issue. And increasingly, it is also a regional security issue.”***

Mr. Peter Zoehrer, Global Coordinator of IMAP, brought greetings from the global network launched in Seoul in 2020. He recalled a recurring historical pattern:

“History repeatedly teaches us a simple but vital lesson: without press freedom, there can be no genuine democracy.”

He cited examples from the region and beyond, praised the resilience of independent journalists, and outlined IMAP’s advocacy for ethical media grounded in accuracy, professional standards, diverse viewpoints and respect for human dignity. ***“We believe that universal values such as truth, fairness, integrity, compassion, and respect for human dignity are indispensable foundations for both resilient democracies and lasting peace.”*** IMAP stands ready to support professional development in media ethics and peace journalism and to develop ethical guidelines for emerging technologies.

Hon. Jovan Jovanovic delivered a sobering assessment of democratic backsliding, using Serbia as the clearest example. He detailed media capture, disproportionate coverage favouring those in power, and the findings of a March 2026 Council of Europe fact-finding mission: 82 physical attacks on journalists in the past year (highest in 18 years), nearly half involving police; 135 verbal attacks by public officials in May 2026 alone; persistent impunity and political pressure. **Serbia’s 2026 Reporters Without Borders ranking of 104th out of 180 was its worst ever.**



Hon. Jovan Jovanović, former Serbian MP, delivers a powerful and candid intervention on media capture and democratic backsliding in Serbia.

Digital platforms, he warned, reward amplification over accuracy through coordinated campaigns, bots and unethical AI use, while foreign influence operations exploit the space. The deeper damage is societal:

“Democracies do not decline only when free and fair elections disappear. They also weaken when citizens stop believing that participation matters, that institutions are impartial, or that truth can prevail over propaganda.”

Other panellists addressed institutional understanding of journalists’ challenges, regulatory adaptation to AI and platforms, media’s potential as a bridge versus inherited divisive narratives, and the greatest threats to professional journalism today. Audience questions via Slido reinforced concerns about public trust in media.

Panel II: Media as a Bridge for Economic Cooperation — Progress, Capture and the Endangered Species of Quality Economic Journalism

The second panel examined media’s role in shaping economic perceptions, investor confidence and regional integration. Contributions from **Mr. Peter Zoehrer**, **Mr. Thomas P. McDevitt** (video) and **Mr. Lutfi Dervishi** were especially pointed.

Peter Zoehrer linked press freedom directly to economic outcomes:

“Without independent and responsible media, corruption, mismanagement, and a lack of transparency can flourish — factors that seriously undermine investor confidence and hinder regional economic cooperation.”

Free and ethical media, he said, ***“can expose wrongdoing, promote accountability, and help create the stable and trustworthy environment upon which sustainable***

economic partnerships depend.” He urged transparent economic reporting, the highlighting of successful regional collaboration, and stronger media literacy. IMAP is prepared to contribute through professional development and recognition of excellence in constructive journalism. His closing challenge was direct:

“The Western Balkans have known both division and reconciliation. The media can either deepen old fault lines or help build new bridges of trust. Let us choose the latter!”

Mr. Thomas P. McDevitt (The Washington Times), speaking via video, outlined three pillars for shared prosperity where reliable media can serve as a bridge to American partners: security and stability (amplifying the narrative of the Balkans as a stable destination ahead of the 2027 NATO Summit), energy independence (infrastructure and LNG projects as sovereignty initiatives), and diaspora integration (connecting entrepreneurial networks with the next generation of innovators).

He positioned The Washington Times as **“a strategic corridor”** and “megaphone” in Washington, DC:

“We do not just report on the Balkans; we provide the Balkans with a voice in America’s capital and all 50 states.”

He called for using the moment “to open doors and build a bridge that lasts well beyond this conference,” grounded in interdependence, mutual prosperity and universal values.



Mr. Lutfi Dervishi opened with a sharp diagnostic question:

“The Western Balkans is a region of six economies, six capitals, and according to some researchers, over 150 television channels. We have plenty of media outlets. But do we have enough economic journalism to serve as a bridge for cooperation?”

He described media as an independent actor with the power “to build or destroy trust; to open or close doors for investment; and to bring the citizens of this region closer together — or push them further apart.”

Lutfi Dervishi, Chairman of the Albanian Center for Quality Media, speaks on the urgent need for stronger economic journalism.

Citing the **2026 Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index** (published weeks earlier), he noted Albania at 83rd, Bosnia and Herzegovina at 90th and Serbia at 104th — all EU-aspiring countries yet in fragile environments vulnerable to propaganda. Political pressure and a weak advertising market continue to undermine press freedom. He was unequivocal:

“If the media is captured politically, financially, or in its editorial line, it cannot serve as a bridge, not for democracy, not for the local economy, and certainly not for the regional one.”

He then highlighted tangible regional economic progress — record FDI of 10.4 billion euros, intra-regional trade growth of over two-thirds, elimination of roaming charges (up to 99% cost reduction to the EU), SEPA transactions making cross-border payments up to six times cheaper, and the EU Growth Plan securing up to 6 billion euros. Yet, he asked, “where is the media in all of this? For the most part, it is missing.”

Quality economic journalism, he argued, “is perhaps the most endangered type of journalism in our region.” Coverage too often consists of corporate press conferences, disguised advertisements or government press releases celebrating GDP growth and investment spikes. “We have very few investigations into cross-border...” matters critical to accountability, barriers and genuine cooperation. This gap means positive developments risk remaining under-scrutinised and under-amplified, limiting media’s ability to build the trust and investor confidence needed for deeper integration.

Cross-Cutting Themes and IMAP’s Distinctive Contribution

Speakers across both panels converged on several imperatives: the information paradox of abundance without shared reality or trust; the dangers of media capture and threats to journalists (physical violence, SLAPPs, verbal attacks, self-censorship); algorithmic and AI-driven risks that distort both democratic discourse and economic narratives; the urgent need for ethical, responsible and peace-oriented journalism; investment in media and digital literacy; and the deliberate choice to use media as a bridge for democracy, reconciliation and sustainable economic cooperation rather than a tool of division.

For IMAP colleagues and journalists, these messages carry direct professional relevance. IMAP’s emphasis on media ethics, peace journalism, professional development and responsible use of emerging technologies aligns precisely with the priorities articulated throughout the conference. The network offers practical avenues — webinars, cross-border collaboration, ethical guidelines for AI in reporting, and recognition of excellence in constructive coverage — to strengthen independent economic journalism, counter

capture, and amplify narratives that build regional trust and cooperation.

Conclusion: Choosing Bridges, Rebuilding Trust

The Balkan Leadership Conference 2026 delivered both a clear-eyed diagnosis and a constructive roadmap. Real economic progress exists alongside serious vulnerabilities in media freedom and journalistic capacity. The path forward requires protecting journalists and independent media, earning public trust through transparency and accountability, investing in literacy, pursuing balanced digital governance that safeguards freedoms, and fostering regional cooperation on information challenges.

As **Danijela Djurovic** concluded:

“Our region needs more facts, more responsibility, more dialogue, and more trust. Media freedom, democratic governance, and digital innovation should not be seen as competing priorities. They should reinforce one another. If we succeed in achieving that balance, we will strengthen not only our democracies, but also the prospects for lasting cooperation, stability, and prosperity throughout the Western Balkans.”



Danijela Djurovic receives the UPF Ambassador for Peace award from Mr. Jacques Marion and UPF Albania Chairman Defrim Methasani.

For journalists and IMAP members across the Western Balkans, the charge is clear and urgent: uphold ethical standards, pursue investigative and constructive reporting (especially in the endangered field of economic journalism), collaborate across borders, equip the next generation, and actively choose to build bridges of understanding and cooperation. The conversations in Tirana provide both inspiration and concrete priorities. The work now is to carry them forward.



Panelists and key speakers from across the Western Balkans — including Danijela Djurovic, Jovan Jovanović, Jacques Marion, and Lutfi Dervishi — pose for a group photo at the Balkan Leadership Conference 2026 in Tirana’s Albanian Parliament

The conference closed with awards recognising contributions to peace and media responsibility, and final remarks by Jacques Marion in thanking all organisers, hosts, panellists and participants for this vital, timely dialogue.

#BalkanLeadershipConference #MediaFreedom #WesternBalkans #DigitalGovernance
#UPF #IMAP #Tirana #Democracy #PeaceJournalism

Thanks for reading! Subscribe for free to receive new posts and support my work.

Pledge your support

Peter Zoehrer is free today. But if you enjoyed this post, you can tell Peter Zoehrer that their writing is valuable by pledging a future subscription. You won't be charged unless they enable payments.

Pledge your support

♡ LIKE 💬 COMMENT ↻ RESTACK