

UPF Balkans Leadership Conference keynote speaker Prime Minister of Kosovo

Jacques Marion
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Pristina, Kosovo -- The prime minister of Kosovo was the keynote speaker at a Balkans Leadership Conference held under the auspices of the Government of Kosovo.

The conference, titled "Peace, Security and Development in the Western Balkans," was held on June 11, 2022, in Pristina's Swiss Diamond Hotel.

The Europe and Middle East chapter of UPF and its International Summit Council for Peace (ISCP) and International Media Association for Peace (IMAP) organized the conference in partnership with the KosovaPress Agency, as well as two organizations that are affiliated with UPF: The Washington Times Foundation and the International Association of Youth and Students for Peace (IAYSP).



Attended by 250 participants representing 14 nations, the conference was honored by the presence of Kosovo's prime minister, **H.E. Albin Kurti**, and three members of his government, as well as three respected former presidents from Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo. Among the participants were current and former members of parliament, rectors and professors from various universities, and representatives of media agencies.

In the context of heightening East-West tensions, the conference addressed the impact of the Ukraine conflict on peace and security in the Western Balkans. While the region is moving toward Euro-Atlantic

integration, it is the object of growing influence from Russia and China. Illustrating this competition, the day before the conference, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Kosovo as the first stop on his Balkans tour and expressed full support for Kosovo's integration into the European Union.

The conference addressed the role of the media in promoting peace and security in times of conflict, taking the case of the war in Ukraine, and pointing to the challenge of raising journalistic credibility in the Balkans. One session focused on cross-border youth exchange and cooperation in the region, and how it could increase youth civic engagement and political participation.



The opening plenary session on the theme "Peace and Security in the Western Balkans" was moderated by UPF Europe-Middle East Co-chair **Jacques Marion**. UPF-Kosovo Chair **Binak Ulaj** welcomed the participants, and **Dr. Katsumi Otsuka**, co-chair of UPF for Europe and the Middle East, offered introductory remarks on the significance of the conference.

In his keynote address, **Prime Minister Albin Kurti** described the fragility of peace in the region. He addressed the risk of moving toward frozen conflicts in Eastern Europe and denounced concerted efforts by some foreign powers to hinder the process of normalization, development, democratization, and integration in the Western Balkans.

The panelists were **President Alfred Moisiu** of Albania (2002-2007), **President Stjepan Mesić** of Croatia (2000-2010), **President Fatmir Sejdiu** of Kosovo (2006-2010), Austrian **Minister of Defense Werner Fasslabend** (1987-1990 and 1990-2000), and Albanian **Deputy Prime Minister Senida Mesi** (2017-2019). In addition, Serbian **President Nataša Mičić** (2002-2004) sent a recorded message to the conference.

The discussion focused on destabilizing trends in the Western Balkans in the context of the Ukraine conflict, outlining the role of Serbia and the influence of Russia. While these trends also affect North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro, it is the unresolved issue of Kosovo's recognition by Serbia that generates most of the tension in the region. As a representative of the Albanian people, who are the large majority in Kosovo and form strong minorities in North Macedonia and Montenegro, President Moisiu denounced the historical oppression of his people and highlighted the importance of Kosovo's independence for peace in the Balkans.

The second panel addressed the theme of "Peace, Security and Development in the Western Balkans." Moderated by Hon. **Besa Ismaili Ahmeti**, a member of Kosovo's parliament, it included current and former government leaders from Balkan nations as well as political scientists: **H.E. Emilija Redžepi**, deputy prime minister of Kosovo (representing the Bosniak community); **Dr. Nano Ružin**, former ambassador of North Macedonia to NATO; **H.E. Slobodan Petrović**, former deputy prime minister of Kosovo (representing the Serb community); and **Dr. Arian Starova**, former Albanian minister of foreign affairs.

The panelists reviewed the political and economic situation in the Balkans, pointing to the need for rebuilding trust in the region. They noted the slow process of integration into the European Union and focused the discussion on the merits or demerits of the "Open Balkans" initiative, an economic agreement initiated by Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia to increase trade and improve bilateral relations. Panelists were divided on the project, with some emphasizing the positive complementarity of regional resources for development, and others fearing that it may re-create a political entity under Serbian, and possibly Russian, influence.

The two panels on the media were co-organized by **Peter Zoehrer**, European coordinator of UPF's International Media Association for Peace (IMAP), and **Skender Krasniqi**, the president of KosovaPress,

a media leader in Kosovo and the current chair of the Association of Balkan News Agencies in Southeast Europe (ABNA). The theme was: "Ethical Reporting in Conflict Situations – Raising the Credibility of Journalism in the Balkans." Representatives from 15 Balkan news agencies attended the event.

The first of the two media panels was moderated by **Sofia Papadopoulou** from Greece, the editor in chief of the Athens News Agency-Macedonian Press Agency (ANA-MPA). The panelists were: **Peter Zoehrer**, IMAP coordinator for Europe; **Thomas McDevitt** from the United States, chairman of *The Washington Times*; **Skender Krasniqi**, president of KosovaPress; **Professor Dr. Predrag Vujović** from Serbia, president of P.R.A. Agency; **Professor Dr. Edmond Hajrizi** from Kosovo, president of the University of Business and Technology; and **Lutfi Dervishi**, a professor of journalism at the University of Tirana in Albania.



The second media panel was moderated by Besa Luzha, program coordinator at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Kosovo. The panelists were: Erman Yüksel from Turkey, editor in chief of World Languages -- Anadolu Agency; Valbona Zhupa, general director of the Albanian Telegraphic Agency; Aimilios Perdikaris, chairman of the Board of ANA-MPA in Greece; Branka-Gabriela Vojvodić, general director of the Croatian News Agency; and Halit Hajdini, deputy general director of the Media Information Agency in North Macedonia.

Both panels raised issues at the forefront of everyone's mind, as the war of information -- and disinformation -- is raging between Russia and Ukraine, impacting daily all of Europe and the rest of the world.

Panelists assessed challenges experienced by journalists in the Balkans and in Europe as a whole, beginning with the decline of public confidence in the media, while their impact on public opinion is unprecedented with the growing influence of social media.

Specific problems in the Balkans were described, although on different levels in different countries: the lack of independence from political parties or governments, the impact of commercialization, the trend toward tabloidization, the poor media literacy of the public, etc.

In the context of the Ukraine war, the discussion focused on questions of propaganda and disinformation. Panelists recalled that the term "media war" was coined during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, when "alongside mercenaries with Kalashnikovs there were also mercenaries with pens and microphones."

Emphasis was given to the need for reforms, for more transparency in media ownership, for more pluralism, for information literacy, etc. And the question was raised: How can journalism constructively contribute to peacemaking? As coordinator of the International Media Association for Peace (IMAP), **Thomas McDevitt** concluded: "We must be innovative in imagining and creating a new role for the media: the role of peace journalism. The way for the media to regain public respect is to become once again a free, independent, and responsible press."

The session titled "Youth Interaction and the Future of the Balkans" was moderated by **Bogdan Pammer**,

president for Europe and the Middle East of the International Association of Youth and Students for Peace (IAYSP). The session highlighted the role and potential of young people for peace and development.

The panelists were: **Hon. Edona Maloku-Bërdyna**, Kosovo's deputy minister of education, science, technology, and innovation; **Dafina Peci**, executive director of the National Youth Congress of Albania; **Jasmin Spahić** of the Youth of the Atlantic Treaty Association of Bosnia-Herzegovina; **Amir Billali**, deputy director of the Agency of Youth and Sports in North Macedonia; and **Lirigzona Morina**, head of the International Office of Kosovo's University of Business and Technology.



The panelists described how school curricula in Kosovo are designed to provide quality education and foster youth interaction in the region. They stressed the importance of strengthening institutional frameworks that ensure young people's representation in policy cycles. They also described how the challenges of territorial fragmentation in a country like Bosnia-Herzegovina are overcome through patience and European Union support, and how divisions of the past are bridged through regional collaboration by the new generation in North Macedonia.

The panelists gave empowering messages to the youth and students present, who were keen to learn about the speakers' paths and vision. The session concluded with four panelists being awarded as Youth Ambassadors for Peace. The awards were presented by **Koji Matsuda**, president of IAYSP International, who emphasized IAYSP's commitment to empowering youth and students to build new bridges and usher in a bright future in the region.

The conference concluded with an Assembly of the Ambassadors for Peace from Kosovo, under the direction of UPF-Kosovo Chair **Binak Ulaj**; parliamentarian **Hydajet Hyseni**, a member of the UPF Global Council; and UPF-Kosovo Secretary General **Ejona Icka**. Representing leaders from the political, religious and academic fields, participants gathered for the election of the new National Peace Council of UPF-Kosovo.

