

UPF Europe and Middle East: 2023 Balkan Leadership Conference: Summary

Gani Rroshi
October 14, 2023



[Opening Ceremony and Session One: Perspectives on Western Balkans' Integration into the EU.](#)

[Session 2: Perspectives on Peace and Reconciliation in the Western Balkans.](#)

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Skopje, North Macedonia -- The latest Balkan Leadership Conference took place in the North Macedonian capital on October 14, 2023.



It was organized by the Europe-Middle East branch of UPF in partnership with the Podgorica Club, an organization founded in 2019 by former presidents of Southeast Europe.

The current president of North Macedonia and 10 former heads of state and government from the six Western Balkan nations, plus Croatia and Slovakia, attended the event at the DoubleTree by Hilton Skopje hotel.

The theme of the conference was "Western Balkans Integration into the European Union: Perspectives and Challenges."

The first session, "Perspectives on Western Balkans Integration into the EU," was moderated by **Jacques Marion**, the UPF co-chair for Europe and the Middle East.

H.E. Stevo Pendarovski, the current president of North Macedonia, who previously attended the UPF-organized Southeast Europe Peace Summit in Tirana, Albania, in 2019, gave the opening remarks.



Five former presidents -- **H.E. Branko Crvenkovski** of North Macedonia (2004-2009); **H.E. Alfred Moisiu** of Albania (2002-2007), currently the Balkans chairman of UPF's International Summit Council for Peace (ISCP); **H.E. Stjepan Mesić** of Croatia (2000-2010); **H.E. Mladen Ivanić**, president of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2014-2018); and **H.E. Fatmir Sejdiu** of Kosovo (2006-2010) -- and two former prime ministers -- **H.E. Mikuláš Dzurinda** of Slovakia (1998-2006), currently president of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies; and **H.E. Igor Lukšić** of Montenegro (2010-2012) -- attended the first session.



The second session, on the theme "Perspectives on Peace and Reconciliation in the Western Balkans," was moderated by **Malinka Ristevska Jordanova**, a former director of the European Policy Institute.

The session included **Hon. Talat Xhaferi**, the president of North Macedonia's parliament; **Hon. Slavjanka Petrovska**, North Macedonia's minister of defense; **H.E. Filip Vujanović**, president of the Podgorica Club, the conference's co-organizer, and president of Montenegro (2003-2018); **H.E. Rexhep Meidani**, president of Albania (1997-2002); and **H.E. Mirko Cvetković**, prime minister of Serbia (2008-2012). **Hon. Dr. Werner Fasslabend**, a former Austrian minister of defense and the president of the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, gave a powerful concluding speech.

The third and last session, dedicated to youth leaders under the theme "Policies and Projects to Foster

Regional Cooperation in Youth and EU Integration," was moderated by **Ejona Icka**, secretary general of UPF-Kosovo.



It featured **Hon. Fisnike Bekteshi Shaqiri**, a member of North Macedonia's parliament; **Naumche Mojsovski**, director of North Macedonia's Agency for Youth and Sport; **Albert Hani**, secretary general of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office; **Aleksandar Ružin**, former adviser to the prime minister of North Macedonia; **Katerina Jakimovska**, senior event officer, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies; and **Dona Kosturanova**, the North Macedonian director of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.



Dr. Michael Balcomb, the UPF senior adviser for Europe and the Middle East, spoke on the need for spiritual values, thus concluding the session and the conference.



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Balkan Leadership Conference: Opening Ceremony and Session I

✍ Written by: Alan Sillitoe, UPF-EUME; Yvo Bruffaerts, UPF Western Europe subregional coordinator; and Svetlana Peneva, UPF-EUME

📅 04 October 2023

Skopje, North Macedonia—Entering the European Union was on the minds of the Western Balkan leaders as the 2023 Balkan Leadership Conference opened.

The one-day international conference, “Western Balkans Integration into the EU – Challenges and Perspectives,” took place on October 14, 2023, at the DoubleTree by Hilton Skopje hotel.

It was organized by the Europe-Middle East branch of UPF in partnership with the Podgorica Club, an organization founded in 2019 by former presidents of Southeast Europe.



Mr. Jacques Marion,
[Co-chair, UPF
Europe & Middle
East, France](#)

The moderator for both the Opening Ceremony and Session One was **Jacques Marion**, the UPF co-chair for Europe and the Middle East.

Opening Ceremony

Mr. Marion welcomed the current and former presidents and prime ministers, the members of the Podgorica Club, the other panelists, and all participants.

Reiterating the theme of the conference, he emphasized the importance of the Balkans as a crucial center for peacebuilding in Europe, and he expressed his appreciation for the collaboration of UPF and the Podgorica Club.

He stated that this conference would provide the opportunity to assess the future of the Western Balkans in relation with the European Union.



H.E. Filip Vujanović,
[president of
Montenegro \(2003-
2018\)](#)

H.E. Filip Vujanović, the former president of Montenegro (2003-2018) and the current president of the Podgorica Club, the conference's co-sponsor, greeted the participants. He then introduced H.E. Stevo Pendarovski, the president of North Macedonia.



**Dr. Stevo
Pendarovski,**
[President, Republic
of North Macedonia](#)

H.E. Stevo Pendarovski thanked the members of the Podgorica Club, who had dedicated themselves to European integration. He then reminded the audience that this year was the 20th anniversary of the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki, Greece, whose goal was to speed up the integration of the Balkan countries in the EU. Apart from Croatia, however, that goal hasn't been realized—for two main reasons:

- The Balkan countries did not do their homework well enough to receive the green light for membership, particularly in fighting organized crime and corruption.
- The EU itself became tired after the three integrations between 2004 and 2013 and the round of the financial and credit crises.

The Ukraine war has put integration back on the EU agenda, but in an unexpected way, **President Pendarovski** said. The European Council in its June summit decided to give candidate status to Ukraine and Moldavia, in a period when the process for other countries is at a standstill.

He asked, “If the EU wants to speed up the integration of the Western Balkans only because of the war, what will happen when the hostilities stop?” He also said that the new French-German proposal for internal reformation of the EU before further expansion was not helpful.

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- Opening and Session 1

Information of the EU before further expansion was not helpful.

The Treaty of Prespa, in which Macedonia changed its name to North Macedonia, was supposed to open the way to both NATO and EU membership, President Pendarovski said. Macedonian citizens are tired of staying in the waiting room of the EU, and the decline of euro-enthusiasm in the other countries in the region is, to some degree, because of the Macedonian case.

In conclusion, he expressed his hope that at the upcoming December summit, the European Council would decide on faster integration for the Western Balkan countries.

Session One: Perspectives on the Western Balkans' Integration into the EU



[H.E. Branko Crvenkovski, President of North Macedonia \(2004 – 2008\)](#)

H.E. Branko Crvenkovski, the president of North Macedonia (2004-2009), described the region's integration process into the EU as being unconscionably slow and even at a standstill.

Three years ago, the EU members accepted a new methodology for negotiations, but still there has been no progress. The Republic of Macedonia received candidate status 18 years ago, but negotiations have not started yet. The blockage with Greece was resolved by changing the constitutional name of the country, and North Macedonia became a member of NATO, but negotiations with the EU still did not start. A new bilateral argument appeared now with Bulgaria and again about issues related to the Copenhagen criteria.

Some of the issues blocking EU accession are the high level of corruption, organized crime, and a corrupt judicial system, President Crvenkovski said. However, the main issue is that the EU itself is not ready for such integration, particularly with its current structure, having 27 members requiring full consensus for decisions. At the same time, the EU is concerned about increasing Russian and Chinese influence in the Western Balkan region.

Faced with this situation, President Crvenkovski offered two propositions that the Balkan nations could make to the EU:

- A process of gradual integration before full membership, thereby assuring the EU of its influence in the Western Balkan region.
- The new members would not have the right of veto, thereby assuring that the decision-making process in the EU would not be further complicated.

There is no guarantee that all the Balkan governments would accept such an approach or, even if they agreed, that this initiative would be accepted by Brussels, but we would have nothing to lose by trying, President Crvenkovski said.



[H.E. Alfred Moisiu, President of Albania \(2002 – 2007\)](#)

H.E. Alfred Moisiu, the president of Albania (2002-2007) and the Balkans chair of UPF's International Summit Council for Peace (ISCP), said that the Balkans need to become safer before integration into the European Union can be discussed.

Politicians in the Balkans must unite if they wish to see the end of the tunnel, the former president said. Having good relations with neighboring countries is a prerequisite to apply for EU membership.

Serbia never condemned the September 24, 2023, attack by Serb militants on Kosovo police in the village of Banjska, and it still refuses to recognize Kosovo as an independent state, the president said. Five remaining EU member states haven't done so either. President Moisiu said he cannot imagine that Serbia would be accepted for EU membership if it does not improve its relationship with Kosovo.

So far, there have been too few bilateral and multi-party talks, President Moisiu said. The United States should not hesitate to bring all parties concerned to the negotiating table, given the existing threats in the region.



[H.E. Mikuláš Dzurinda, President, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Prime Minister of Slovakia \(1998-2006\)](#)

H.E. Mikulas Dzurinda, prime minister of Slovakia (1998-2006) and the president of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, said that EU enlargement is apparently in a vicious circle. Considering the Ukrainian war and the recent attack on Israel by Hamas, the EU should grow bigger and stronger to be able to take more responsibility on its shoulders, he said. The United States also takes this view, especially as a new axis of cooperation between Hamas, Iran, Russia and China is becoming more and more manifest.

The Balkan candidate states need political and economic reforms to meet increasingly stringent criteria, the former Slovakian leader said. The EU should reform its voting system in the foreign policy and defense areas.

Prime Minister Dzurinda encouraged all political leaders in the region to accelerate the integration process. He suggested that they ask East European EU member states to help.

He said he expects the upcoming EU Summit in December to consider both the accession of Ukraine on the EU's eastern flank and the accession of countries from the Western Balkans.



H.E. Stjepan Mesić, the president of Croatia (2000-2010), said that peace in the Balkans region once again faces significant challenges in the fields of geopolitics, immigration



and inflation.

No country in Southeast Europe or the Balkans is interested in participating in a new Cold War, nor in a possible “hot war” between the superpowers, President Mesić said. However, due to the war in Ukraine, the countries in the region are being asked to take sides, which causes divisions and instability. Despite these trends, not a single country in the region has given up its major foreign policy goal of EU membership.

H.E. Stjepan Mesić,
President of Croatia
(2000 - 2010)

However, that membership sometimes seems to be moving away from the countries of the Western Balkans, regardless of all the support and promises from Brussels about speeding up the negotiations.

Today's European Union has more influential members who do not advocate the enlargement of the union, although others do support enlargement. President Mesić fears that the Western Balkan countries, instead of becoming full EU members, may end up with a kind of surrogate membership at the edge of Europe.

The former president's major concern is the war in Ukraine. Brussels' turn in the direction of geopolitics may weaken the role of the EU in European and global peacebuilding policy by contradicting the principles of free trade and markets. The economy of the EU today is used for geopolitical purposes. These are not policies that guarantee peace and economic prosperity. The EU must return to its founding principles and those of the European citizens, so that it may remain respected in Europe and globally.



H. E. Fatmir Sejdiu,
President of Kosovo
(2006 - 2010)

H.E. Fatmir Sejdiu, the president of Kosovo (2006-2010), said the problems in the Balkan region, the war in Ukraine and the conflict between Israel and Palestine are due to a lack of a reconciliation processes between citizens and countries. Some of the Western Balkan countries, such as Serbia and Kosovo, have had a painful experience of war and disruption, and we are still trying to heal the wounds.

President Sejdiu pointed out the importance of peace and stability in the Balkan region, particularly focusing on the experiences of Kosovo, Serbia, and neighboring countries. He highlighted the historical context of conflicts and their devastating consequences for the region's people and emphasized the role of international intervention in ending aggression and promoting peaceful negotiations.

The speech underscored the progress made by countries like Croatia in their integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions and the challenges faced by others, like Bosnia-Herzegovina, in achieving stability. President Sejdiu acknowledged Kosovo's journey to independence and its efforts to overcome post-conflict challenges.

He also condemned recent attempts by armed groups to destabilize Kosovo and accused Serbia of supporting such activities. He called for Serbia to take several steps to contribute to regional peace, including signing and implementing agreements and stopping all activities that undermine Kosovo's constitution.

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H.E. Mladen Ivančić,
president of Bosnia
& Herzegovina
(2014-2015, 2016-
2017)

H.E. Mladen Ivanic, president of Bosnia-Herzegovina (2015-2017), said it is questionable whether the Western Balkans are ready for reforms. Free media and independent justice are under pressure, and crime and corruption still must be rooted out.

Better mutual understanding and cooperation are needed among the Western Balkan countries, he said.

In 2005, Europe was not ready to admit new Western Balkan states, fearing their participation in the EU decision-making process. Today opinions are divided among EU member states regarding new members from the Western Balkans. More recently, one can hardly justify that Ukraine would get membership and not the Western Balkan countries.

President Ivanic suggested that the EU be asked for inexpensive and uncomplicated measures, such as the accreditation of universities, the elimination of roaming charges, or for a status similar to that of Switzerland in its relationship with the EU.



H.E. Igor Lukšić,
Prime Minister of
Montenegro (2010 -
2012)

H.E. Igor Lukšić, prime minister of Montenegro (2010-2012), said the war in Ukraine has put EU enlargement on the agenda again. The EU originally planned to admit new member states only in the 2030s. The enlargement policy stagnated after the accession of Croatia in 2013. However, both the EU and the Balkan countries have much to gain from accession.

Prime Minister Lukšić referred to the South-East European Cooperation Process, initiated in 1996 to enhance neighborly relations and promote dialogue and political, security and economic cooperation, especially in these challenging times of the Russia-Ukraine war.

The integration progress of new countries into the EU has slowed despite a new regional agreement signed at the end of 2022, Prime Minister Lukšić said. The EU has restructured its membership policy and included a new category of associated member states. This will allow the EU time to implement further internal reforms without slowing the enlargement process.

The associated member states can align themselves with among others the EU Common Foreign and

The associated member states can align themselves with, among others, the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, have free movement of people, goods, services and capital, and access to EU development funds to overcome economic obstacles.

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Balkan Leadership Conference: Session II

✍️ Written by: Christine Chev  , UPF Europe and the Middle East

📅 14 October 2023



(L to R) Malinka Ristevska Jordanova, Slavjanka Petrovska, Talat Xhaferi, Filip Vujanovi  , Rexhep Meidani, Mirko Cvetkovi  , Werner Fasslabend

Skopje, North Macedonia—The second session of the 2023 Balkan Leadership Conference was titled “Perspectives on Peace and Reconciliation in the Western Balkans.”

The one-day international conference took place on October 14, 2023, at the DoubleTree by Hilton Skopje hotel.

It was organized by the Europe-Middle East branch of UPF in partnership with the Podgorica Club, an organization founded in 2019 by former presidents of Southeast Europe.



[Dr. Malinka Ristevska Jordanova, former director of the European Policy Institute](#)

Dr. Malinka Ristevska Jordanova, a former director of the European Policy Institute, was the moderator for Session Two. She expressed regret that after 20 years of hoping for the resolution of conflict in the region, we again face a global threat to peace. She invited the panelists to address the new challenges that the global situation presents.



[Hon. Talat Xhaferi, President of the Assembly, Republic](#)

Hon. Talat Xhaferi, the president of North Macedonia’s Assembly, said that the topic of the Western Balkans’ integration into the European Union is even more relevant now with the crisis in Ukraine and beyond. Dehumanization, worthlessness of human life, lack of common sense, and diffusion of fabricated news all challenge us to feel responsible and be objective.

These conferences represent a good opportunity to coordinate activities and common goals within the region, Mr. Xhaferi said. Mutual parliamentary cooperation is another steppingstone: “In ensuring progress for the region with commitment to EU values of democracy, the role of MPs is very crucial in that they understand people in their diversity.”

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or North Macedonia reconciliation and cooperation are the common denominator for success in transforming the Western Balkan region and its obtaining EU membership, Mr. Xhaferi said. Building bridges between the region and the European Union, and increasing progress in accord with the Berlin Process, the UN Sustainable Goals and EU policies will ensure a better future for the Western Balkans.

North Macedonia, after obtaining full NATO membership, continues to work toward achieving these strategic goals for the realization of peace. However, the European family would benefit by extending membership to the Western Balkans. This would confer prosperity, security and stability.

Mr. Xhaferi concluded his official speech by saying that the conference “should become a strong voice to awaken one’s conscience and incite taking responsibility and action for a better and just world where every human being is valued and respected equally.”

He then added a personal note about his life experience. Through the challenges in the region and loss of human lives, everybody could come to their senses and learn that living together is the only solution for the future. The compromises that this implies, though difficult to make, resulted in gaining a lot. Furthermore, sitting together at a table in 2001, in a situation in which everybody could speak frankly and discuss their feelings, made a good starting point for long-term solutions for the benefit and well-being of all. He expressed his conviction that North Macedonia will never get into the same situation again.



H.E. Filip Vujanović, president of Montenegro (2003-2018)

H.E. Filip Vujanović, the president of the Podgorica Club, the conference co-sponsor, as well as a former president of Montenegro (2003-2018), said that reconciliation is unrealistic as far as the first generation is concerned, because pain and wounds are still too fresh. To come to respect the other nations, it will take several generations.

Mr. Vujanović emphasized the term “coexistence”; people should focus on communication and cooperation to live together and not just live side by side. A common perspective is needed to live for the benefit of all nations and for the good of the Western Balkans.

The best contribution for coexistence would be rebuilding mutual trust, he said. Two factors would contribute to this: economic cooperation and trade, through which the borders would progressively disappear; and mutual recognition of diplomas, which eventually would bring higher employment.

For a better future, Mr. Vujanović said, we need to encourage cooperation and coexistence through looking at factors that bring us together rather than those that tear us apart. The five wars experienced in the Western Balkans resulted only in poverty and a low quality of life.

The European Union needs to integrate the Western Balkans to become whole, Mr. Vujanović said. The Berlin Process helped to develop cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans. Yet cooperation is still needed in terms of education and economics. It makes no sense that the Western Balkans should trade with countries that are situated much farther away rather than with their neighboring countries.

In conclusion, he stated that it is better to live in the present than the past and that reconciliation eventually will come. His expectation for the future is that “the EU finally understands that there is no future for the EU without fully integrating the Western Balkans.”



H.E. Slavjanka Petrovska, Minister of Defence, North Macedonia

Hon. Slavjanka Petrovska, North Macedonia’s minister of defense, who has worked at the government’s Secretariat for European Affairs, said we need to frankly discuss the lessons learned from the past to be able to deal with the challenges we are facing.

EU membership is very high on the agenda for all leaders in the region. Yet, the essence of the speeches heard during the elections campaign take us further away from EU integration, she said.

The EU itself exemplified integration in 1958, when former enemy nations signed an agreement in Rome which brought a unified Europe the way we see it today. It is true that reconciliation takes time, she said, but during that time we will work on reconciliation through coexistence and cooperation to become EU members with dedication and sincerity.

Meanwhile, we feel as though we have been left in the waiting room of EU integration, Ms. Petrovska said. What makes EU skepticism grow is that we are expected to do all the homework alone. When we analyze our shortcomings and our good points, we expect the EU to take greater engagement. Much effort has been made in developing common projects, such as recognition of university degrees, economic cooperation, etc.

However, people, not just politicians, feel that these efforts are not being recognized and valued. Integration needs to be done from both sides. The European integration of the Western Balkans is a security issue. By ignoring the sincere efforts made by our region, the European Union will contribute to the rise of malicious influence from non-NATO countries.

While the EU concentrates on its own agenda and political reforms, time passes by, and in a few years, the requirements for EU integration will be even more difficult to fulfill. As a result, enlargement will become impossible to realize because of geopolitical changes in the region.

Lessons learned from past mistakes and from the achievements of predecessors can ensure continuity and allow us to reach the goals faster. In 2018, the Republic of Macedonia became a NATO member and at the same time became the Republic of North Macedonia. It has been a challenge for all citizens to accept their new identity. Now we have the responsibility to work together with other nations in the region to obtain EU membership.

As a member of the younger generation of politicians who love their country and would like to live in peace

and coexistence, she is convinced that they can learn from the lessons of the past and achieve that goal.



[H.E. Rexhep Meidani, President of Albania \(1997 – 2002\)](#)

H.E. Rexhep Meidani, the president of Albania (1997-2002), said that the long and complex history of conflicts in the Western Balkans is reflected in the sentence, wrongly attributed to Winston Churchill: “The Balkans produce more history than they can consume.”

How can Europe help the Balkans consume their history? Europe already has done a lot to support the region and foster good relations, Mr. Meidani said. Even though a lot more can be done, it is our job in the Western Balkans to work together and consume this history of the past. To achieve peace in the region has been and still will be an outstanding challenge. In his opinion, there are various perspectives to consider:

- European integration. The initial enthusiasm of 20 years ago has slowly disappeared, as a consequence of the many delays and broken promises. The European Union and the United States should take a strong stance against countries that undermine democratic values through demagoguery and autocracy, he said.
- NATO integration. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are part of NATO. On the other hand, Kosovo, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina have developed close ties with NATO, thus contributing to an increase of optimism in the region.
- Diplomacy and mediation. Both trust and equality are needed, not only for conflicting parties but also for mediators. That has not always been the case for international organizations in the past.
- Civil society organizations. Their work is very important in fostering mutual dialogue and building bridges. For this, UPF has played and continues to play an important role.
- Truth and Reconciliation organizations or commissions. The viewpoint that these commissions would help resolving past wrongs and avoiding nationalism is debatable. Mr. Meidani remarked that the political climate is not ideal, since some promote terrorists and make them national heroes.
- Economic stability and development. This will address the root cause of conflict. Building infrastructure and creating jobs will reduce poverty and increase cooperation in the region.
- Historical narratives. Common efforts to share understanding of the past among various ethnic groups would reduce the tension. Civil societies could help and encourage this, even though it is not easy.
- Security and stability. The EU and the Western Balkans must cooperate on security issues. A full commitment to rule of law and democratic values with integration, regional cooperation and mutual dialogue are requirements for the realization of lasting peace and reconciliation.

At the end of the Ukraine-Russia conflict the situation in the world and in the Western Balkans will be different, Mr. Meidani predicted. We can expect a division into two or even three poles.



[H.E. Mirko Cvetković, Prime Minister of Serbia \(2008 – 2012\)](#)

H.E. Mirko Svetcovic, the prime minister of Serbia (2008-2012), gave a PowerPoint presentation:

- Reconciliation is the only necessary option, because of the bitter experience lived during the Yugoslavian disintegration.
- The main obstacles to reconciliation in the Western Balkans are the scars left after the collapse of Yugoslavia and also the low democratic capacity.
- The process of reconciliation is very slow but ongoing. While political leaders seem to have difficulty in taking responsibility for reconciliation, NGOs and activists are more successful. Massive involvement from the EU is needed to speed up the process
- The EU is important for the Western Balkans. The EU is the Western Balkans’ most important foreign trading partner. Furthermore, labor migration from the Western Balkans to the EU—about one-fifth of the population—contributes to 10 percent of the region’s GDP.
- Reconciliation in the Western Balkans in our lifetime will come only through greater involvement of the EU and major steps toward democratization within the region.



[Dr. Werner Fasslabend, President of the Austrian Institute for European and](#)

Dr. Werner Fasslabend, a former Austrian minister of defense and the current president of the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, said that the main danger in the Western Balkans is that 20 percent of young people have left their country. Stability is endangered when there is a difficult economic and demographic situation. As a consequence, no foreign investments are coming into the region.

Dr. Fasslabend pointed out that the responsibilities are threefold:

First, Brussels who should put more pressure on countries to be more constructive. The whole region has its membership stalled because of one or two countries.

Second, if the politicians within the region had been acting in the best interests of their nation, a solution already would have been found. Corrective actions should be taken from the institutions and from civil society.

[Security Policy,](#)
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[\(1990- 2000\),](#)

[Austria](#)

Third, it is also our responsibility as the Podgorica Club to influence, to make a statement as a corrective action.

In the end, Dr. Fasslabend said, stability and development start with cooperating with neighbors. Most exports in Austria are with the small neighboring countries rather than with really big countries far away. When you live on the border, you can collaborate with neighbors, even though they belong to different countries. Neighborhood matters. Trading in such a way will make the nation stronger and will bring jobs to young people. In conclusion, a better future for the region will be ensured by a more intense cooperation with Brussels institutions, better cooperation with national institutions and civil society.

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Balkan Leadership Conference: Session III

✍️ Written by: Yvo Bruffaerts, UPF Western Europe subregional coordinator

📅 14 October 2023



(Left to Right) Ejona Icka, Dr Balcomb, Dona Kosturanova, Naumche Mojsovski, Albert Hani, Fisnike Bekteshi, Katerina Jakimovska, Aleksandar Ružin



Skopje, North Macedonia—The third and final session of the 2023 Balkan Leadership Conference was “Policies and Projects to Foster Regional Cooperation in Youth and EU Integration.”

The one-day international conference took place on October 14, 2023, at the DoubleTree by Hilton Skopje hotel.

It was organized by the Europe-Middle East branch of UPF in partnership with the Podgorica Club, an organization founded in 2019 by former presidents of Southeast Europe.



[Mrs. Ejona Icka](#),
[Secretary General](#),
[UPF Kosovo](#)

For the third session, the moderator was **Mrs. Ejona Icka**, the secretary general for UPF in Kosovo.



[Mr. Naumche Mojsovski](#), [director of the Agency of Youth and Sport](#),
[North Macedonia](#)

Mr. Naumche Mojsovski, the director of the Agency of Youth and Sport, North Macedonia, said the agency focuses on developing comprehensive bilateral relations with Southeast European countries, as well as on multilateral processes and activities supported by, among others, the Council of Europe and UNESCO in the field of sports and young people.

The Berlin Process, which was set up in 2014 as a platform for high-level cooperation between official representatives of six Western Balkan nations, was a milestone, Mr. Mojsovski said. It involves the EU institutions, international financial institutions and Western Balkan civil society, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office and businesses. Young people are enabled to explain their positions on different platforms, discuss experiences and take part in decision-making. A clear policy regarding the development of youth infrastructure is now in place.

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[Hon. Fisnike Bekteshi, Member of Parliament, North Macedonia](#)

Hon. Fisnike Bekteshi Shaqiri, a member of North Macedonia's parliament, said that investing in youth is investing in the present and in the future. Initiatives to improve the life and future opportunities of young people must be supported. The Western Balkan region must be made attractive and inclusive so that young people can stay in their countries and realize their ambitions, despite the many challenges they face today, such as high unemployment rates, exclusion and discrimination. The EU stands behind many initiatives that improve the life and future possibilities for youth.

Many young people have emigrated to EU countries, but jobs should be created for them in the Western Balkans. They should be helped to set up and develop their own businesses, to acquire new skills by training, and to study at universities abroad. They should be encouraged to participate in every aspect of society, in policy design and civil activism, so that they take their future in their hands.



[Mr. Albert Hani, Secretary General of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office](#)

Albert Hani, the secretary general of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, said that RYCO is linked to the Berlin Process. When the EU opened its doors to the Western Balkans, young people from the region demanded to participate in policymaking. These young people, by their example of cooperating, communicating, and coordinating freely beyond their barriers, have laid the groundwork for politicians' improved cooperation and decision-making. In this time of wars and conflicts, not only the Western Balkan countries need their example but also the rest of Europe.

RYCO, an independently functioning institutional mechanism founded by the Western Balkans' six participants (W6), takes care of young people's needs, concerns, and desires and helps them to participate in political discussions. Youth are the ones who are opening the doors for European values to enter the Western Balkans, Mr. Hani said. Therefore, they should be listened to at all levels of society.



[Mr. Aleksandar Ružin, former Adviser to the Prime Minister of North Macedonia](#)

Aleksandar Ružin, former adviser to the prime minister of North Macedonia, said that Western Balkan youth are not satisfied with their social status and unfavorable position in the labor market. On the whole, unemployment figures among young people in the Western Balkans are well above figures in the EU. The unfavorable status of young people, economic, social, and institutional problems, as well as corruption and the lack of trust in the institutions, motivate many young people to emigrate. Between 2012 and 2022, about 155,000 left their countries.

In 2018, the EU set up a new strategy for the period 2019-2027 to improve young people's prospects and encourage them to participate in civil and democratic life. The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) agreed that regional cooperation in the Western Balkans is essential for the enlargement process. Mr. Ružin explained that the program for the European Youth Capital 2022 events in Tirana, Albania, included the promotion of volunteering, strengthening youth organizations, trading networks, synergies among people from the region and from the entire Europe region.



[Ms. Katerina Jakimovska, Senior Event Officer, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies](#)

Katerina Jakimovska, a senior event officer at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, said that, contrary to the general belief that young people are interested only in having fun and shouldn't take part in political decision-making, nowadays the youth are awakening and growing increasingly concerned about the present and their future. However, many young people from the Western Balkans have decided to build their future abroad and have turned their backs on their home countries. The war in Ukraine, the new conflict in Israel, and recent events in Kosovo show that the road to peace is still long.

Ms. Jakimovska wondered whether it is the fate of the Western Balkans to live with nationalism, hatred, tensions, violence, and prejudice. The way to diminish nationalism is education, integration, open minds and hearts looking to the future rather than dwelling in the past. She mentioned the European Year of Skills, which started in May, saying that the Western Balkans also should attract people from outside the EU who have needed skills.



Dona Kosturanova, the director for North Macedonia of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, said that youth participation is more important than ever, because there are fewer and fewer young people in the Western Balkans, due to decreasing birth rates and increasing emigration. The long-term consequences of the brain drain



[Dona Kosturanova,](#)
[director for North](#)
[Macedonia of the](#)
[Westminster](#)
[Foundation for](#)
[Democracy](#)

need to be considered, she said. The Westminster Foundation, a non-departmental public body set up in the United Kingdom to support democratic institutions overseas, has calculated how much emigration costs for countries. Emigrated young people are unlikely to return to their countries of origin.

Young people are the reflection of the societies where they have grown up, she said. We therefore have pessimistic youngsters, cynical about democracy and institutions. Stagnation, blockades, and challenges impact even young people's optimism and outlooks toward EU accession.

She recommended that strategies for Western Balkan youth should be further elaborated and financially supported. Education of democratic and civic values should be provided. Quality of life, economic standards, anti-corruption, and justice should not be taken lightly, as all of these matter, not only for the population in general but also especially for young people.



[Dr. Michael](#)
[Balcomb, Regional](#)
[President, FFWPU](#)
[Europe and the](#)
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Dr. Michael Balcomb, the UPF senior adviser for Europe and the Middle East, offered closing remarks. Change cannot be a precondition of relationships, he said; it comes through relationships, through partnerships. The UK fell out of love with the EU because the British felt that the EU should change to be more like Britain, while Brussels wanted the UK to become more continental. If 2030 has been set as a goal for European integration, then action and development are needed today.

Sixty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that our scientific and technological capabilities have far outrun our spiritual capacities. One year earlier, UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld said that he saw no hope for the future of humanity without a spiritual revolution.

At the inauguration of UPF 18 years ago, its founder said that peace will never come as long as the people entrusted with it are not at peace with themselves, their families or their neighbors. Spiritual values here do not refer to a particular creed, but rather to the values that make us truly human, such as dignity, integrity, kindness, generosity, and love, Dr. Balcomb said. There is hope, provided that we create committed relationships and put the most important values first.

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