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Western Balkans Policy Summit

EVENT REPORT



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Introduction: Is the EU-Western Balkans ‘dance’ partnership still on?

Is the long-running ‘dance’ between the EU and the Western Balkans still gliding across the floor in harmony, or have the partners fallen dangerously out of sync?

That was the fundamental question put forward by moderator **Shada Islam**, Director of Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe, to high-level panellists and guests at Friends of Europe’s latest debate on the region, held in Brussels on 3 December amid considerable anxiety over the Western Balkans’ immediate and long-term future.

Many at the annual policy summit event – this year entitled It takes two to tango: the Western Balkans between hope and reality – gave candid accounts of their fears and frustrations following the EU’s recent surprise decision to delay accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia.

“ They need to know what kind of accession process it’s going to be. Once you deliver, is the process going to give you the famous carrot?

Majlinda Bregu, Secretary-General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

President of Kosovo*, **Hashim Thaçi**, said the region found itself at an “historical crossroads” and called the situation “dangerous”, with Western Balkans countries feeling discouraged by the EU’s position on the enlargement process. He cautioned that the resulting geopolitical vacuum threatens to be filled by other ideologies, with some countries already tumbling backwards into nationalism and populism.

Representing the EU’s newest member Croatia – which is preparing to assume the EU Council Presidency in 2020 – **Marko Pavić**, Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds for Croatia and 2019 European Young Leader, said the decision on North Macedonia and Albania was a “mistake” and pledged to act as an “honest broker” in urging the process forwards.

Offering reassurance, the European Commission Director-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement, **Christian Danielsson**, said “the door for the Western Balkans is open. It is part of European history, it’s Europe.”

On regional cooperation, it was “high time” a bottom-up process gave more credence to the voices of citizens, said Secretary-General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) **Majlinda Bregu**, but she said the region’s countries needed to have a merit-based and “credible process” for European integration ahead of them in order to be successful.

“They need to know what kind of accession process it’s going to be. Once you deliver, is the process going to give you the famous carrot?,” she added.

The policy summit gave space for discussions on myriad issues, including the need

for: reforms to continue and not “backslide”; progress on the normalisation of Serbia-Kosovo* relations; more free movement opportunities, not least fulfilling promises on visa liberalisation for Kosovo*; more involvement from civil society and citizens, especially young people; more focus on corruption; and increased EU investment in the region.

Parallel sessions were also held to further discuss two specific themes. The first addressed the low representation of women and younger people in the region’s labour market, large-scale emigration, and the mismatch between the education system and the requirements of many employers. The second focused on the digital transformation and integration of the Western Balkans, including the physical infrastructure, building human skills, and tackling ‘brain drain’.

The event concluded with a session focusing on reconciliation in the region between

“ Shall we get past this slow tango for next year and say we are going to rock and roll?

Shada Islam, Director of Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe

different cultures and ethnicities and whether non-political entities, including the arts, could play a bigger role where politics is failing, or is unwilling, to breakthrough.

Islam asked whether a new narrative could see a different pose being struck by this time in 2020, adding: “Shall we get past this slow tango for next year and say we are going to rock and roll?”

From hope to despair... what now?

Western Balkans countries are still smarting from the recent move by the French President to undermine the EU’s pledge to open accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania. Linking the talks with EU internal reforms and changes in the enlargement process struck a heavy blow that was unexpected and has been widely characterised as a strategic error that should be undone immediately.

“ My invitation is to look beyond the technical fulfilling of criteria and think strategically

Hashim Thaçi, President of Kosovo*

“The EU is... making a mistake with the region. This delay is simply an invitation for further trouble in the Western Balkans,” said Kosovo’s* President Hashim Thaçi, setting a frank tone for the opening session of the event, entitled ‘A dance without partners? Between disappointment, despair and hope’.



1. **Marko Pavić**, Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds for Croatia, European Young Leader; **Christian Danielsson**, Director General at the European Commission Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR); **Josip Brkić**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bosnia and Herzegovina
2. **Agi Veres**, Deputy Regional Director, UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)
3. **Majlinda Bregu**, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)
4. **Marko Pavić**, Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds for Croatia, European Young Leader



The disappointment was palpable. After two decades of ‘dancing’ with the region’s aspirations for EU integration there were deep concerns that – despite positive achievements such as the historic Prespa agreement – disillusionment and frustration at the lack of decision-making in Brussels was damaging trust and negatively influencing national politics and regional cooperation.

“The spirit that brought important changes and reforms is now being threatened by populism and nationalism,” said Taçi.

“In Albania those who have undertaken the toughest reforms in the judiciary over the last three decades are now under attack and being challenged. My invitation is to look beyond the technical fulfilling of criteria and think strategically,” he said, before being the first of several participants to call for the immediate opening of the accession talks.

The Kosovar* President also raised the issue of visa liberalisation for his country as another necessary, tangible step forward, saying: “We have met all the criteria put forth by the EU. We don’t seek it as a present... it is something we have worked very long and hard for, together, and is something we deserve.”

Croatian minister Marko Pavić reiterated it was a “mistake” to obstruct the opening of EU talks with North Macedonia and Albania, while the RCC’s Majlinda Bregu called for clarity on the accession process to avoid the issue causing stagnation in the very reform measures that were needed for integration to succeed. Bregu added that it would be difficult for regional cooperation and integration to be successful if European integration wasn’t the clear end point.

“ The last thing we need is something that offers separate integration or regional political integration and not integration into the EU

Josip Brkić, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs for Bosnia and Herzegovina

With regional cooperation also “under stress” she said it was “high time to come at it from the citizens’ perspective, and bring their voices in. They are smart and know their lives will be improved if there are better relationships with their neighbours,” she said, adding: “Not all the best ideas come from politicians”.

Also stating that the EU’s recent position on Albania and North Macedonia was “unjust”, Josip Brkić, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs for Bosnia and Herzegovina, agreed with Bregu that “the last thing we need is something that offers separate integration or regional political integration and not integration into the EU”.

A priority for the new Commission?

Can hope be drawn from the fact that we are entering a fresh era, with a new European Commission President who talks of geopolitics shaping their policies, and an upcoming Croatian EU Council presidency for 2020 that has pledged to help its neighbours move forward with the accession process?

Amid the uncertainty “one constructive thing has happened, which is that the issue of the Western Balkans, which was falling slightly low on the EU’s agenda, is now up front for everyone to see and think about,” said moderator Shada Islam.

“ We will also try to be an honest broker in the Council, but our view is that [it] should open negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia

Marko Pavić, Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds for Croatia, and European Young Leader

20 years after beginning its own EU journey, Croatia will host an EU-Western Balkans summit in Zagreb in May 2020. Pavić explained their vision was to help the Western Balkans countries go through the process that Croatia itself completed in 2013.

“We see the summit as a road map for the countries in the next 10 years. We want to help all of the countries to see the benefit to the region [of the EU]. We have experience of this region and know what happens when we see instability.”

“ Can the Western Balkans become part of the discussions on major European challenges, such as migration, the ecological transition, or issues related to digital?

Christian Danielsson, European Commission Director-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement

“We will also try to be an honest broker in the Council, but our view is that [it] should open negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.”

But while that door remains open in theory, there are issues in the short-term, conceded the European Commission’s Christian Danielsson, who said their recommendation to open accession talks still stands but was unable to offer a timetable for moving forward on discussions about the methodology.

“There are two issues. In October the Council was not able to reply to the recommendation of the Commission. The Commission’s role is to come back and help the member states to be able to take that decision. It’s clear from the European Council that that needs to be done before Zagreb [in May 2020]. What will be essential



1. **Dea Rrozhani**, Youth Delegate, Albania; **Shada Islam**, Director for Europe & Geopolitics, Friends of Europe; **Trina Hoti**, Youth Delegate, Kosovo*; **Olga Devic**, Youth Delegate, Serbia
2. **Velibor Bošković**, Executive Director, Science Technology Park of Montenegro
3. **Bernard Nikaj**, Ambassador, Embassy of Kosovo* to Belgium; **Hashim Thaçi**, President of Kosovo*
4. **Nicole Farnsworth**, Programme Director and Lead Researcher at the Kosovo Women's Network; **Rudina Hajdari**, Member of the Albanian Parliament



is that both North Macedonia and Albania continue on the reform path. We don't want to see backsliding.

"The second issue that came up was about how we can ensure this enlargement process becomes more efficient. Are there issues about the fact that we haven't seen all the reforms that we wanted to see in the Western Balkan countries? Can the Western Balkans become part of the discussions on major European challenges, such as migration, the ecological transition, or issues related to digital?"

On the latter, no timetable had been agreed, but he said: "I want to underline how much the Western Balkans is a priority of the new Commission – I think that should be appreciated."

As well as the wish for "more traction" on reforms, he said there was a need to reach the end of the dialogue on full normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo* as soon as possible "because that will release so much energy for the Western Balkans and also fill the vacuum that otherwise...risks being filled by others".

Some hope was offered via two representatives of young women from the Western Balkans, who are part of this year's youth delegation, sponsored by UNICEF.

Youth delegate, Trina Hoti from Kosovo* said young people, who are leaving the region in large numbers, should genuinely be considered as part of the process.

She called for more EU investment in education and employment, especially for the youth, "We should teach young people from the Western Balkans how to love their countries... and contribute to them."

"The youth are not just the future, as the politicians usually say, they are the present," she said.

Thaçi said he still remained an optimist, "I want to believe 2020 will be the year of political stabilisation in the Western Balkans. This is a common goal of the EU, the US, NATO and all the countries of the Western Balkans. For the year 2020 to be such a year we need some achievements, some steps."

But have the steps of the dance become confusing and awkward? As was expressed by an Albanian politician who spoke from the floor, "We are in the middle of the ballroom, we are already dancing. The European Commission has already committed itself. What do we need to do and when?"

Women, millenials and the labour market

Development, growth, transformation and reform – crucial topics being discussed at this summit depend not only on effective policies, but on the "dynamism, energy and vibrancy of women" and on "unlocking the energy and creativity of young people," said moderator Shada Islam, in opening a debate on the Western Balkans labour market.

But many are emigrating from the region – with around one third of citizens living outside it – and those who stay are often fall through a wide gap between their skills and the skills needs of employers. How can the region effectively counter 'brain drain' and 'brain waste' and could the EU do more to encourage the inclusion of more youth and women in the labour market?

As was pointed out in an earlier session, “by the time EU accession materialises in the Western Balkans, most of the Western Balkans will already be in the EU,” said **Agi Veres**, Deputy Regional Director of the UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Yet the EU accession process “lacks focus” on the changing patterns of outward migration, and the youth and women in that mix, she said.

“ Young people really want to have access to being global citizens, access to world class services, living standards, education, digitalisation, connectivity. These are the things that matter.

Agi Veres, Deputy Regional Director of the UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)

“While in the past we were focusing on job creation and the economic conditions, I think we need to shift our mindset to look at the complex picture of economic, social and ecological motivations of young people. The generation that we are dealing with have a very different mentality from previous generations,” she said.

“This nuance is extremely important, because the lack of job prospects is one aspect – and there needs to be a lot of attention on job creation and understanding the labour market – but it’s gone way beyond this point. Young people really want to have access to being global citizens, access to world class services, living standards, education, digitalisation, connectivity. These are the things that matter.”

“ What if the EU invested in more opportunities for girls, and boys as well, in entrepreneurship, in programming, in coding and these kinds of skills?”

Dea Rrozhani, Youth Delegate, Albania

The employability and skills gap is even more acute for women in the region, said Veres, with girls still less likely to pursue education in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sectors.

She said the EU and development professionals needed to work together to look at the issue holistically – considering issues such as the quality of education, digitalisation and the online and gig economy in tandem – otherwise they would be continuing to support the widening gap rather than closing it.

Veres added that she and other colleagues were advocating for the EU to invest in public-private partnerships or multilateral partnerships to address labour market



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1. **Josip Brkić**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bosnia and Herzegovina
2. **Pierre Heilbronn**, Vice-President of Policy and Partnerships at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)
3. **Zoran Jolevski**, former Minister of Defence of the Republic of North Macedonia and Chief Negotiator in the Macedonian name issue with Greece
4. **Velma Šarić**, Founder and President of the Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC)



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issues, “This space is there for the taking, where there are a lot of opportunities to make a change.”

The session also heard from two youth delegates, **Dea Rrozhani** from Albania and Olga Devic from Serbia.

“ If there’s anything that we need to bring about, as young people, it is to really fight corruption

Rudina Hajdari, Albanian Member of Parliament, and Leader of the Opposition

“We used all these 21st century skills to improve the society we live in. We hope that we motivate all the other youth in our country and in the region. Because what our region is suffering from now is [a lack of] motivation and perspective. We still haven’t got in [to the EU]. Now the youth is thinking, where are we going? So, what if the EU invested in more opportunities for girls, and boys as well, in entrepreneurship, in programming, in coding and these kinds of skills?” said the 16-year-old Albanian programmer **Dea Rrozhani**, who co-founded a team called D3c0ders which has created an app – GjejZâ, (Find your Voice) – that helps victims of gender-based violence access support.

Veres and other speakers said a further, vital factor to consider was that, until younger people in particular trusted that they were operating within a merit-based system, and that institutional corruption and nepotism were being genuinely addressed, tackling the scale of the region’s ‘brain drain’ issue would not be feasible.

Albanian Member of Parliament, and Leader of the Opposition, **Rudina Hajdari**, is one of the few who left the region for another part of the world, then came back.

Also highlighting corruption as a key factor that drives people away, and prevents them from returning, she said it was at the “root” of many people’s decisions – from the youth to older professionals – to emigrate.

“If there’s anything that we need to bring about, as young people, it is to really fight corruption. For me, it’s about changing our lives and communities and not really about showing the EU what we’re doing. We really need to really show that the corruption that is spread throughout the government, the justice system or everywhere it’s present, that the young people will show an example and never be part of that.”

Despite coming under pressure, the 32-year-old has stayed in politics to keep up the battle against a system in which she says the ‘right’ connections with people in power still count for more than merit.

“I stayed because I needed to stand up to some really big guys and say, ‘you’re wrong to do this’.”

Preventing gender discrimination

With 60% of women in the region currently outside the labour market, the Kosovo Women's Network (KWN) has been working to prevent women's labour force discrimination, based on research being carried out by their network of 165 women's rights organisations.

“ Until we address these fundamental gender stereotypes, which are not unique to the region, we will have trouble paving a way for more women to enter into the labour force

Nicole Farnsworth, Programme Director and Lead Researcher

Programme Director and Lead Researcher, **Nicole Farnsworth**, said in addition to occupational stereotypes, a key root cause of discrimination that was “obvious” but insufficiently discussed was traditional gender norms and stereotypes.

“It's still very widespread that women's role is in the household and if there's a child the woman should be the one taking care. Until we address these fundamental gender stereotypes, which are not unique to the region, we will have trouble paving a way for more women to enter into the labour force,” she said.

Moreover, women also face high levels of discrimination inside the labour market, including sexual harassment, and discrimination over hiring and contract length.

Another major issue is that few Western Balkan countries have made significant progress in achieving the EU's ‘Barcelona objectives’ on the development of greater childcare and pre-school facilities for children. Citing Kosovo* as an example, Farnsworth said childcare is “almost non-existent” until the age of four or five.

“Addressing this could really open the door for women's labour force participation,” said Farnsworth.

On the basis of their research, KWM made several recommendations, including: invest in affordable childcare and early education, which also contributes to the educational attainment of children, and creates jobs; target the curricula to promote European values and address gender inequalities; amend labour laws in the region – most of which are currently open – and ensure they are aligned with the EU Work-life Balance Directive; organise more training for labour inspectors, particularly on gender-based discrimination; boost efforts to conduct gender impact analyses when addressing the informal economy; point to gender-based discrimination and labour issues more regularly in EU country reports and use political dialogue to pressure governments to address it.

Farnsworth concluded by reiterating the call to move forward with Kosovo's* visa liberalisation process.



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1. **David Ringrose**, Head of Unit, International affairs, European Commission Directorate General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology
2. **Isabella Ritter**, co-founder of LambdaLambdaLambda, Pristina and Brussels; **Shada Islam**, Director for Europe & Geopolitics, Friends of Europe
3. **Zvezdana Kovač**, Executive Director at the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CRDSEE)



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“Keeping Kosovo’s* youth in a ghetto is not only incredibly discriminatory, but it’s dangerous. It’s leaving space for other actors to come in, and for potential extremism, particularly when combined with brain drain and poor educational outcomes. If the EU wants to invest in the youth, visa liberalisation is the way for young people to see the world... and to understand European values,” she said.

“ We’re living in a digital revolution for society, business, and education – and must include the Western Balkans in that revolution

Joe Litobarski, Editor at Debating Europe

Digitally transforming the region

How are governments and international organisations in the Western Balkans promoting digitalisation and connectivity? In a roundtable discussion, participants focused on digital transformation, notably through physical infrastructure plus key human skills such as education and training. “We’re living in a digital revolution for society, business, and education – and must include the Western Balkans in that revolution,” said the moderator Joe Litobarski, adding that this comes with many challenges and opportunities.

There was consensus that digitalisation and technology can boost industries and create new jobs. The EU has recently introduced a ‘digital agenda’ for the Western Balkans, covering cooperation, reforms, education and skills training, and help for entrepreneurs, noted David Ringrose, Head of International Affairs at the European Commission DG CONNECT. This agenda complements the bloc’s wide-ranging support for other sectors across the region over two decades.

“ Digital is a great opportunity to close the gap with the rest of the developed world

Velibor Bošković, Executive Director, Science Technology Park of Montenegro

Of special note is the regional roaming agreement, signed in June 2019, to boost mobile connections and regional integration. It has already cut the cost of mobile phone calls by 80%. Roaming charges region-wide should eventually fall to 0%, followed by cuts in roaming charges between the EU and Western Balkans.

The EU has super-computing centres in Sofia and Maribor – cities close to the Western Balkans. By linking to these new centres, the entire region could tap into its potential for digital innovation and creativity.

“Digital is a great opportunity to close the gap with the rest of the developed world. Montenegro and the region in general are working hard on digital transformation of

society and the economy,” said Velibor Bošković, Executive Director, Science Technology Park of Montenegro, speaking by video link. He said the region’s governments have both a responsibility and opportunity to digitally transform and develop their countries.

Being relatively small, Western Balkans countries can work flexibly and quickly on digital, provided they do this smartly. According to Bošković, “Montenegro should aim to be a digital hotspot, building on improved governance for life and work.” The nation’s own digital focus areas are infrastructure, governments and legislation to create modern pro-digital transformation, and human resources.

“ We must prioritise improving digital skills and competence for people in the Western Balkans, by giving them sufficient resources

Ulrike Damyanovic, Head of Western Balkans and Turkey Unit at the European Training foundation (ETF)

Education as a digital driver

Most of the digital session’s debate revolved around human resources. “We must prioritise improving digital skills and competence for people in the Western Balkans, by giving them sufficient resources,” said Ulrike Damyanovic, Head of Western Balkans and Turkey Unit at the European Training foundation (ETF). This ‘soft connectivity’ is important because it complements infrastructure connectivity.

Western Balkans education systems must be reformed, to increase the resources of schools and colleges, as well as to accelerate smart specialisation, especially in digital courses. These reforms are urgently needed, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s 2015 PISA report, which revealed how the region’s 15-to-16-year-olds are doing poorly in reading, literacy skills, and maths.

Several of the region’s digital skills initiatives are managed by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and ETF. Skills councils have been set up with businesses, government and education institutes, to give certificates to young people with local experience of IT jobs. Dedicated vocational training is increasingly common. In Montenegro, some firms do in-house training in IT skills, such as coding.

“ The digital revolution offers opportunities for youth and people in the region’s remote areas

Pierre Heilbronn, Vice-President of Policy and Partnerships at the EBRD

“The digital revolution offers opportunities for youth and people in the region’s remote areas,” noted Pierre Heilbronn, Vice-President of Policy and Partnerships at the EBRD, which has long been involved in Western Balkans projects. A recent EBRD conference focused on soft connectivity and how to connect the region to the EU – for example, through broadband to remote regions, privatisation of telecom operators, and support for innovative companies with equity and loans.

Three examples of EBRD work in the region were cited: creating a strong regional stock exchange through networking over an electronic platform; using e-procurement to enhance government transparency, with benefits for civil society; and thanks to greater investment in local digital businesses, creating more employment opportunities for local skilled people – especially women and youth.

Montenegro cannot quickly catch up with universities in the rest of the world, Science Technology Park’s Velibor Bošković remarked, “So we should leapfrog by thinking creatively about digital education and be world-beating at the country’s digital transformation.” He also noted how hard it can be to transform higher education, where teachers often stay in secure jobs for decades. Other participants drew attention to the struggle of former EU accession countries, who joined 15 years ago, to reform and modernise their education systems.

By boosting digital education and skills, the region can also tackle the severe problem of local labour shortages. Two representatives of the UNICEF youth delegation and digital natives from the region – Bobana Radovic and Emar Kurtagic – underlined the damaging impact of ‘brain drain’ on the region’s economy and society, when young and often skilled people emigrate elsewhere for better jobs and wages. Learning by doing is crucial, hence the importance of regional initiatives like ‘IT Girls’, which offers digital skills training for girls and women. Mobile learning solutions are also a growing niche.

“ We must boost the use of digital in companies, by addressing the region’s skills gap and internet connectivity problems

David Ringrose, Head of International Affairs at the European Commission Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CONNECT)

Companies must adopt digital mindset

Many in the debate prioritised developing business skills in the Western Balkans.

“We must boost the use of digital in companies, by addressing the region’s skills gap and internet connectivity problems,” said Ringrose. Digitally literate workers will be less tempted to go abroad, if more local businesses complete their digital transformation. Kosovo* has even encouraged many experienced expats to move back home, while two Macedonians experienced in business have returned to found companies that now employ 1,500 staff.

Innovation in the economy is key to helping the region benefit from digital transformation. According to Ringrose, that means upping support for start-ups and small businesses. The Western Balkans boasts seven digital innovation hubs, with more in the pipeline, to

foster digital jobs and entrepreneurship skills through ideas, networks and leapfrogging. The European Commission also supports Startup Europe Club in the region. Besides acquiring digital skills, the region's entrepreneurs must also change their mindset, behaviour and action.

The debate ended with calls for digital transformation to concentrate on youth and women, while not excluding individuals and older people without tech skills. The Western Balkans must create an environment where citizens are ready and want to learn modern skills. The region should also promote a range of measures, as there is no one solution to digitalisation.

As traditional banks shy away from young entrepreneurs, the region must assess alternative funding options, such as crowdfunding and fintech. Some of these are already offered by the EBRD and European Commission.

The challenge of reconciliation – positive news?

Four elements should be borne in mind when working towards genuine reconciliation in a region such as the Western Balkans – commitment, trust, funding and a 'bigger picture' view that over-rides short-term political gain.

Although the Prespa agreement proved reconciliation is possible at state level, is this considerable challenge better met by civil society organisations (CSOs) than governments, in a region that remains tainted by tensions 20 years after the end of the Yugoslav Wars? And should the EU invest more in reconciliation initiatives at society level – whether that be the arts and culture, the academic sphere, women's networks or other CSOs – rather than putting too heavy an emphasis on economic and political measures?

“Governance in the 21st century is not just about what states, governments and national leaders do, but also about what civil society does

Shada Islam, Director of Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe

Moderator Shada Islam said the Prespa agreement was ground-breaking: “But governance in the 21st century is not just about what states, governments and national leaders do, but also about what civil society does – what peace initiatives people can take together to bring themselves together.”

Opening the session with an example of where the arts aim to bind citizens around social issues, Isabella Ritter, Co-Founder of private contemporary art gallery LambdaLambdaLambda – based in Pristina with a second space in Brussels – showed a video by a young artist from Kosovo*.

“He is part of the LGBT community. His works are mostly about unrequited love, and also deals with the impossibility, for him, to have certain relationships.”



1. **Ulrike Damyanovic**, Focal Point for South Eastern Europe and Turkey, European Training Foundation (ETF)
2. **Tanja Fajon**, Chair of the European Parliament Delegation to the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee and Trustee of Friends of Europe
3. **Marko Pavić**; **Christian Danielsson**; **Josip Brkić**; **Majlinda Bregu**; **Hashim Thaçi**; **Shada Islam**
4. **Hasim Thaçi**, President of Kosovo*; **Christian Danielsson**, Director General at the European Commission Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)



“ LGBT is an important topic everywhere. In the Balkans region we know it’s quite a new movement and it connects many countries

Isabella Ritter, Co-Founder of private contemporary art gallery LambdaLambdaLambda

She said the gallery sought artists with a metaphorical and poetic way of putting across social messages: “LGBT is an important topic everywhere. In the Balkans region we know it’s quite a new movement and it connects many countries.”

During the subsequent, predominantly downbeat, debate on the current state of reconciliation efforts in the Western Balkans, the four themes frequently arose as participants offered their perspectives from a broad spectrum of sectors and experiences.

“ Reconciliation hasn’t taken place yet and we have managed to downgrade the meaning of the word

Zvezdana Kovač, an ex-journalist and Executive Director of the former Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CRDSEE)

The word ‘reconciliation’ itself was called into question, as a concept that risked becoming devoid of meaning.

“Reconciliation hasn’t taken place yet and we have managed to downgrade the meaning of the word,” said Zvezdana Kovač, an ex-journalist and Executive Director of the former Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CRDSEE).

“This is due to overuse and misuse of the word and people having the impression that it is an obligation. Of course, it must not, and cannot, be based on obligation but rather on goodwill. That goodwill is something that is missing – I don’t recognise it or see it in any of the countries of the Western Balkans. There is no honest approach, no concrete plan or strategy... from the countries, nor from the EU,” she said.

She added there was also insufficient funding coming from the bloc. “I know we always complain and ask for more and more money but really there is not enough.”

Reconciliation involves everyone

As a former minister of defence and ambassador of the Republic of North Macedonia to the United States, and chief negotiator in the Macedonian naming dispute with Greece, Zoran Jolevski could hardly be more qualified to talk on the subject of reconciliation.

“You have to speak about reconciliation on all levels... between family members, between friends, between different ethnic and religious groups and between states.

“ We need to have everyone in a society involved as much as possible, because reconciliation is not possible when it’s just led by one group

Zoran Jolevski, Former minister of defence and ambassador of the Republic of North Macedonia to the United States and chief negotiator in the Macedonian naming dispute with Greece

In order to achieve lasting peace, reconciliation must have a bottom-up and top-down approach.”

Jolevski said state-level efforts were crucial from a leadership point of view, but said leadership comes from different parts of society, not only the political sphere.

“We need to engage in that process – we need to have everyone in a society involved as much as possible, because reconciliation is not possible when it’s just led by one group. The process requires a lot of effort, and it’s slow and takes time.”

Citing an initiative (Renewing Our Minds) that brought together around 60 youths from Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia, in 1999, he said some of them had returned for an anniversary event in North Macedonia this year and recounted how they had initially doubted whether they could spend time with people they saw as adversaries.

“But after three weeks together a lot of things had changed. It shows that bringing young people together is extremely important for the future of our region and for reconciliation.”

Calling Europe itself a “peace project” Jolevski said the Western Balkans had moved substantially forward but was “not there” yet: “A lot of work needs to be done – and that needs to be done first among ourselves but also with help from our friends in the EU.”

Also focusing mainly on young people, Sarajevo-based Velma Šarić, Founder and President of the Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC), said it was unfortunate she was unable to bring positive news on reconciliation from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“ Civil society is, unfortunately, carrying the whole burden of one government in our region

Velma Šarić, Founder and President of the Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC)

“As a civil society organisation, I am always trying to find something positive and to think about the possible solutions because civil society is, unfortunately, carrying the whole burden of one government in our region.”

“We have war criminals being celebrated as heroes, we have a constant denial of the recent past, including genocide, and we have a concerning trend of a quite depressive young generation of people who just want to leave the country.”

With three opposing narratives about the recent conflict vying for prominence, and no state ministry for education, there was a need for substantial help with building a school curriculum containing a multi-history perspective based on research and analysis by independent researchers and historians, she said, adding that there were Council of Europe recommendations on multi-history teaching that could be used.

She also highlighted the fact that segregation along ethnic lines persists in 56 schools in the country.

The PCRC's recent work has included educating CSOs in the mechanisms of genocide prevention and creating a coalition of 30 organisations to try to tackle hate speech.

"We should not be waiting... on politicians, we should create strong networks, we should multiply our efforts. Maybe if we share research and information we will be listened to as one voice and maybe politicians will take us seriously."

Šarić also called for a shifting down of reconciliation efforts to a more local level of cantons and municipalities.

As a politician, she has to stay optimistic but it's "difficult" in this case, said Tanja Fajon, Chair of the European Parliament Delegation to the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee and Trustee of Friends of Europe.

"Cooperation is a big challenge in the region, and it might take decades before we reach reconciliation. I wouldn't say we haven't managed anything so far, but I could agree with those that have the pessimistic view that things are deteriorating."

“ Education is crucial for people to bring them away from this [nationalistic] way of thinking that is very present

Tanja Fajon, Chair of the European Parliament Delegation to the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee and Trustee of Friends of Europe

She said the key to reconciliation was to continue the path towards EU integration but "the challenges are huge on both sides" and there was a lack of trust between countries in the region and EU capitals.

EU politicians should have the "wisdom" to understand that they have to support and assist the Western Balkans region with the process, for the sake of stability in the continent.

She said that having held recent summits involving young people talking about the region's political challenges she was "surprised that they were even worse than the political leaders in their countries". "Education is crucial for people to bring them away from this [nationalistic] way of thinking that is very present," said Fajon.

Two representatives from the youth delegation, called for the EU to support efforts that are "reconciliation without knowing it" by bringing young people together for different activities.

A participant from Kosovo* said a lot of negative narratives remained from the conflict and persisted “until people have the chance to meet each other”.

With reference to title of the event, Ivana Balabanova, youth delegate and a dancer from North Macedonia, said in following the art they love they were practising “reconciliation without knowing”.

She called for more investment in programmes that interest young people and give them opportunities, such as exchange and networking projects, “so they can communicate more with the countries around them”.

“Two people need to have trust in order to be able to dance together, and that means perfect, well-established communication. I think this is the essence of everything we have spoken about today. Because we lack trust – in our neighbours, our governments, private companies, in our opportunities and our future. That’s why nothing works in our countries – because we don’t believe it will work. We need the capacity to see the bigger picture. We have to learn that we need to stand together to create bigger ideas.”

** For the United Nations Development Programme, references to Kosovo in this document accordingly shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999); For the European Union, this designation used is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UN Security Council resolution 1244/99 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.*

Youth Delegation

Young people are the present and the future of the Western Balkans. To secure a more prosperous future for their citizens and improve their chances of EU accession, one of the key issues countries in the region need to address is the challenges facing their youth. More and more young people from the Western Balkans are working, however the overall unemployment rate stands at around a third of the young population. Many are emigrating because of a lack of employment opportunities. Given the brain drain challenge that the region faces, creating a dynamic economy where young innovators can flourish is of vital importance. Listening to the perspectives of young people on these questions and actively including their voices in discussions is therefore crucial.

In the context of this annual Balkan Summit, Friends of Europe and its partners had brought together a delegation of youth representatives from the Western Balkans region, to mainstream the issues which are important to them throughout the discussions of all sessions. Facilitated by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), these delegates actively intervened in sessions and provided recommendations to promote the youth agenda across the Western Balkans and the EU.

Bobana Radovic

Business Manager for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Youth Innovation Lab, Montenegro

Alongside her studies as a Master's student, Bobana is the business manager of the UNICEF Youth Innovation Lab in Montenegro. Through the Lab, she has worked on programmes such as UPSHIFT, the Hackathon for Social Change, Financial Literacy skills, U-Report, alongside various skills workshops. The main focus of these programmes is skills-building - equipping adolescents and youth with 21st century skills, which they do not get in schools, and preparing them for their future careers and improving their employability.

Dea Rrozhani

Co-founder of D3c0ders and Co-creator of GjejZâ, Albania

Dea is a 16-year-old programmer and designer who helped found D3c0ders, a team of young female coders, and GjejZâ, an app developed to combat gender-based violence by connecting government institutions, NGOs and experts with girls in Albania. The D3c0ders team was awarded the 1st Place Prize at the Technovation Girls world finals in San Francisco, California, and were invited to Washington D.C. by the Secretary's Office of Global Women Issues to give a presentation about GjejZâ at the US Department of State. Dea was also nominated as a Technovation Student Ambassador.

Esma Kurtagić

IT Girls representative, Bosnia and Herzegovina

As an IT Girls representative, 14-year-old Esma has advocated for the status of young people in education processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She represents the IT GIRLS initiative at UNICEF, which tackles the constraints that girls and women face in the ICT sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina by increasing their professional development, promoting informal and lifelong ICT learning and enhancing confidence for girls. The IT Girls Initiative is currently transforming how computer science is taught in 10 schools and 200 girls in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Olga Dević

Steering Committee Member of U-Report Serbia, Serbia

Olga is an 18-year-old Serbian youth and child rights activist and peer educator. Having been active in youth engagement topics since primary school, she advocates for youth and child participation in decision-making processes. Olga has been a member of several youth organisations on the local, national and international levels and has led many youth projects in Serbia and abroad. Olga also serves as Steering Committee member of UNICEF's U-Report Serbia led by UNICEF. She was previously a youth delegate at the Congress of local and regional authorities of Council of Europe and the youngest-ever member of the Governing Board of National Youth Council, as well as a part of European Youth Parliament Serbia.

Ivana Balabanova

Owner and Cultural Director of Beatrix Cultural Center and Beatrix Dance League, North Macedonia

A 27-time international champion in urban dance, Ivana is the owner and cultural director of Beatrix Cultural Center in Skopje, North Macedonia. She is also the creator of the dance camp and festival "Beatrix Dance League" which was created as a platform to encourage young artists, dancers and choreographers. In 2018, she created her most successful piece called "Silence" on domestic violence and its impact on children's lives. Following the great success of this performance, Ivana and the Beatrix Cultural Center teamed up with UNICEF to present segments of "Silence" across several cities throughout North Macedonia.

Trina Hoti

Facilitator of the Youth Reference Group, Kosovo*

Trina is an 18-year-old advocate for the rights and inclusion of children and young people in political decision-making. Trina has supported UNICEF's efforts in Kosovo* to include young people's perspectives in development programmes, as well as serving as facilitator of its Youth Reference Group. She has chaired two parliamentary sessions during the International Day of the Child in 2016 and Universal Children's Day in 2017. Last year, Trina represented the interests of children in high-level meetings between children from Kosovo* and the Prime Minister, the Speaker of Parliament, the Ministers and MPs of Kosovo*.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The way forward

These recommendations are based on the outcome of the summit discussions and include additional input from the 2019 youth delegation.

What next?

To improve the negotiation and accession process and to strengthen the relations between the EU and the region, the **EU** should:

- **Open** accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania immediately, regardless of discussions on methodology.
- **Introduce** visa liberalisation for Kosovo*, as well as more free movement within the region.
- **Increase** the investment in the region with a focus on education and infrastructure.

In the meantime, the **Western Balkan governments** with the support of the EU need to:

- **Move** forward in the process of normalisation of Serbia-Kosovo* relations.
- **Boost** the level of involvement in regional cooperation from younger people and citizens in general.
- **Continue** reforms with a view to EU integration.

Labour market

To enhance chances for young people, in particular women, and fully develop the labour market potential, both **regional actors as well as the EU** should:

- **Examine** the complex picture of economic, social and ecological motivations of young people leaving the region, and design policies accordingly; the EU and development professionals need to work jointly and holistically.
- **Conduct** further training for labour inspectors, particularly on gender-based discrimination.
- **Boost** efforts to conduct gender impact analyses when addressing the informal economy.

Moreover, **governments in the region** need to:

- **Invest** in affordable childcare and early education.
- **Target** curricula to promote European values and address gender inequalities.
- **Amend** labour laws and ensure they are aligned with the EU Work-life Balance Directive.
- **Restore** trust in a 'merit-based' system by genuinely tackling institutional corruption and nepotism.

The **EU** should also:

- **Address** gender-based discrimination and labour issues more regularly in EU country reports and use political dialogue to pressure governments to address it.
- **Fund** programmes creating opportunities for young people, teaching skills such as entrepreneurship, programming and coding.

Digital transformation

To increase competitiveness and prepare their economies for the future the **Western Balkans governments** should:

- **Reform** the Western Balkans education systems: increase resources of schools and colleges; accelerate smart specialisation.
- **Boost** the use of digital in companies, by addressing the region's skills gap and internet connectivity problems.
- **Increase** support for start-ups and small businesses.
- **Assess** alternative funding options, such as crowdfunding and fintech.
- **Aim** to turn Montenegro into a digital hotspot; leapfrog universities elsewhere by thinking creatively about digital education.

The **EU**, relevant companies in the region and governments should:

- **Invest** more in improving human skills and competences – ‘soft connectivity’ – to complement infrastructure connectivity.
- **Focus** the digital transformation mainly on youth and women.
- **Create** links between Western Balkans countries and EU super-computing centres in Sofia, Bulgaria, and Maribor, Slovenia.

Reconciliation

To foster and accelerate reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts **Western Balkans governments** should:

- **Commit** to reforming the education system; assist with developing independently researched multi-history perspectives for national curricula.
- **Build** and create strong networks of civil society organisations, including exchange platforms, joint workshops and networking events.
- **Shift** reconciliation efforts down to a more local level.
- **Reform** the remaining segregated schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The **EU** needs to keep playing an active role and:

- **Support** programmes that focus on bringing young people together, including ‘soft’ reconciliation.
- **Invest** in the creation of more synergies between local, regional and state level efforts.

