

## The 2018 Balkans Peace Road tour traveled through the nations of Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Tirana, Albania -- An international UPF group spent over a week traveling by bus through the Western Balkans, bringing a message of peace and friendship to a region that is still recovering from years of bloody conflict.

The 2018 Balkans Peace Road tour traveled through the nations of Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina from October 3 to 9. The final event of the Peace Road was scheduled to take place in Greece on October 21. Events connected with the Peace Road initiative were held in 12 cities.

The idea for the Balkans Peace Road began in September 2017, when the Balkan-level chapter of International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP) was founded. The Peace Road project was conceived of as a follow-up to the IAPP launch as well as a step toward the realization of a Balkan Culture and Sports Festival in the future.



A total of 25 participants -- both young and old -- traveled on the Peace Road bus, representing 12 nations. Among the VIPs were Dr. Michael Balcomb and Mrs. Fumiko Balcomb, the regional chairs of UPF for Europe and the Middle East; Mr. Jack Corley, the UPF chair for Eastern Europe; Mr. Giuseppe Cali, the UPF chair for Southern Europe; Mr. Gaqo Apostoli, the chair of UPF-Albania; and Mr. Ali Lacey, the coordinator of the Albanian Peace Council.

The first event of the 2018 Balkans Peace Road took place on October 3 in the Albanian Parliament with the presence of the deputy speaker of the Parliament, Professor Vasilika Hysi; former President Alfred Moisiu; the world leader of the Bektashi Order, Hajji Dede Edmond Brahimaj; the coordinator of IAPP in

Albania, Professor Dr. Shezai Rrokaj; and many current and former members of Parliament, Ambassadors for Peace and young people – altogether 150 people.

Right after the Parliament event, a public event took place in a main square of Tirana in cooperation with the city government. Deputy Mayor Andi Seferi greeted the participants, along with Dr. Michael Balcomb, the regional chair of UPF for Europe and the Middle East. The deputy mayor was appointed as an Ambassador for Peace on that occasion in recognition of his support of the Peace Road project. At the end of the artistic program and performances, around 100 young people rode bicycles in Tirana until the Balkans Peace Road bus brought the participants to their next destination, the city of Shkodra.



With the cooperation and support of Shkodra City Hall, 70 local bicyclists -- both professional and amateur -- cycled for peace around the city in the late afternoon before gathering at the main square in front of the city government offices. Mayor Voltana Ademi greeted participants and then received an Ambassador for Peace certificate.

By the next morning, October 4, the participants had crossed into Montenegro and had arrived in Podgorica, the capital. The city administration organized a program in the main square. Many young people joined our group with their bicycles to ride for peace. The deputy mayor, Mrs. Sladjana Vujacic, came to show her support for the Balkans Peace Road. After giving messages of peace were given, the deputy mayor was appointed an Ambassador for Peace.

At every event there was a ceremony of handing over the Peace Road flag, in which Dr. Balcomb or one of the UPF leaders gave the flag to a local VIP, who then handed it over to a young person among the participants to bring to the next nation.

On the morning of October 5, the next event took place in the Montenegrin city of Rozaje in cooperation with the city administration. The event took place in the city's Cultural Center, where more than 300 people filled the hall. Mayor Ejup Nurkovic welcomed the Peace Road participants, followed by messages of peace from our VIPs and young participants and performances. Mr. Nurkovic also was appointed to be an Ambassador for Peace. At the end, young people cycled a few kilometers and departed for the next destination: the city of Peja in Kosovo.

In Peja, the delegation was welcomed by a group of cyclists outside the city accompanied by police. Together with the young Peace Road participants, they cycled for peace toward the main square, where many people were gathered and artistic performances were organized by the city hall. When the cyclists arrived, the official ceremony of giving peace messages, handing over the flag and signing the 2018 Balkans Peace Road map took place. Peja Mayor Gazmend Muhaxheri was awarded an Ambassador for Peace certificate.

On the same day, October 5, the Peace Road delegation headed toward Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. At the entrance to the city 15 cyclists waited for us, and together we cycled toward the city center. The delegation was welcomed by Pristina Mayor Shpend Ahmeti in the Assembly Hall, where he was presented with an Ambassador for Peace certificate and peace messages were given.

The next day, October 6, the participants crossed into Macedonia and arrived in the capital, Skopje. The public event took place in a park and was organized in cooperation with the government of Čair, one of Skopje's municipalities. Deputy Mayor Asif Bekteshi was present and was presented with an Ambassador for Peace certificate by Dr. and Mrs. Balcomb.

The evening program continued with a congratulatory banquet organized by UPF-Macedonia. The speaker of Parliament, H.E. Talat Xhaferi, attended and congratulated the Balkans Peace Road participants, encouraging them to keep conveying peace messages in the troubled Balkans.



On October 7, the Balkans Peace Road headed toward Belgrade, the capital of Serbia. The delegation was welcomed at a dinner organized by UPF-Serbia together with several Ambassadors for Peace, including Mr. Aleksandar Pekovic, the founder of the ARTERIA Creative Network; Mr. Sinisa Ruzicic, a professional football coach and journalist; and others. At the end, the Peace Road flag was handed over to a young person representing Serbia, followed by the signing of the Peace Road map by all the participants.

The final event took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Symbolically the travelers went through Croatia to include it in the Peace Road map and do something big next year. In Bosnia the Peace Road event was combined with a Football for Peace event in the town of Bugojno, located some 130 kilometers (81 miles) from the capital, Sarajevo.

Thirty young students (age 13 to 16) from three nearby small towns -- Gorbji Vakuf, Dorbji Vakuf, and Jajce -- gathered to play football. During the opening ceremony, Bugojno Mayor Safet Saran warmly welcomed the international visitors. There were wonderful matches among the young students, and later there was also a friendship match between the young students and the international visitors.

Two additional events of the 2018 Balkans Peace Road were scheduled for October 21: in the city of Korçë in southeastern Albania and the city of Kastoria in northwestern Greece.

Over 30 partners joined and supported the 2018 Balkans Peace Road, including the Albanian Parliament, eight municipalities, many bicycling clubs and other partners, as shown in the Peace Road banner and brochure.

We feel very confident that the 2019 Balkans Peace Road will be of a greater scale and will have a bigger impact in the Balkans.

