

UPF-Europe and Middle East: Western Balkan Leaders Strengthen Cooperation

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Pristina, Kosovo – On October 5, 2024, UPF-Europe and Middle East held a conference in Pristina, Kosovo, on the theme “Peace, Stability and Demographic Transition in the Western Balkans.” The conference was co-hosted by the government of Kosovo and opened by **Prime Minister Albin Kurti**. Conference partners included the University of Business and Technology (UBT), the largest private university in Kosovo, and the International Association of Youth and Students for Peace (IAYSP).



Approximately 130 people attended the event, which was held at the Hotel Emerald in Pristina. In addition to the prime minister, speakers included former heads of state of Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro; two current or former government ministers; a member of the European Parliament; three current or former members of Parliament; and a UN official.



Session 1 centered on fostering peace, stability, and European Union (EU) integration in the Western Balkans, with a focus on addressing demographic transitions and regional cooperation. Moderated by **Mr. Jacques Marion**, co-chairman of UPF Europe and Middle East, the session featured speeches by key political figures. Prime Minister Kurti emphasized the need for institutionalization and economic growth, urging collaboration with the diaspora and improving links between education and employment. He also stressed the positive role of migration.



Former Albanian President Alfred Moisiu discussed ongoing security issues, particularly the unresolved tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, while warning of the destabilizing influence of Serbia's ties to Moscow. Montenegro's former **President Filip Vujanović** highlighted regional cooperation and urged prioritization of the Western Balkans' interests over national concerns.

Other speakers, including **H.E. Fatmir Sejdiu**, former president of Kosovo, and **Hon. Klajda Gjasha**, former minister of European integration of Albania, called for deeper EU involvement, regional reforms, and Kosovo's inclusion in NATO. **Hon. Lukas Mandl**, member of the European Parliament, envisioned the Balkans as a tech hub, advocating for visionary EU policies. **Hon. Marija Miteva**, member of

Parliament of North Macedonia, reaffirmed North Macedonia's commitment to reforms despite the challenges, and called for continued regional cooperation toward EU membership.

The session concluded with **Dr. Michael Balcomb**, co-chairman of UPF-Europe and Middle East, advocating for a "spiritual revolution" in global politics, emphasizing personal responsibility and reconciliation as keys to lasting peace.



Session 2 on "Demographic Transition in the Western Balkans" focused on the challenges of youth migration, family issues, and the impact of the "brain drain" on the region. **Hon. Daulina Osmani**, vice minister of youth, culture and sports for Kosovo, highlighted Kosovo's efforts to support youth through child allowances, scholarships, and employment platforms. **Dr. Edmond Hajrizi**, president of UBT University, emphasized the need for coordinated strategies to address demographic decline, including technology and educational reforms.

Mrs. Viktorija Nesterovaite, project officer for the Balkans, UNODC, discussed anti-corruption education as a crucial tool for fostering integrity among young people. **Dr. Avni Kastrati**, chairman of the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, explained the stages of demographic transition in the Western Balkans, highlighting trends such as low birth rates and an aging population. **Mr. Bogdan Pammer**, president of IAYSP for Europe and the Middle East, emphasized the importance of youth engagement in peacebuilding and reconciliation, particularly between Kosovo and Serbia, while also advocating for new frameworks that empower young people.

The session concluded with remarks by **Mr. Mark Brann**, vice chairman of UPF-Europe and Middle East, who praised the contributions to fostering peace and emphasized the importance of continued efforts for reconciliation in the Balkans, referencing past successful peace initiatives like the "Bridge of Peace."