

UPF EUME: Balkan Leaders Address Media Freedom & Digital Governance

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Tirana, Albania – On the morning of June 26, 2026, the Albanian Parliament hosted the Balkan Leadership Conference on "Media Freedom, Democracy and Digital Governance in the Western Balkans." The event was co-sponsored by UPF’s International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP), the Albanian Parliament, the Washington Times Foundation, the International Association of Youth and Students for Peace (IAYSP), the International Media Association for Peace (IMAP) and several Balkan media organizations.



As the countries of the Western Balkans advance toward European Union integration, the media have an essential role to play in promoting democratization, transparency, and regional cooperation. At a time of global geopolitical tensions, widespread disinformation, and declining public trust in institutions – reflected in a wave of popular protests across the region – the conference addressed the challenges and opportunities facing both traditional and digital media.

Before a capacity audience, **Deputy Speaker Klodiana Sphiu** opened the conference with a keynote address. Welcoming remarks followed from **Mr. Jacques Marion**, president of UPF Europe and the Middle East (EUME); **Hon. Jorida Tabaku**, chair of the Parliamentary Commission on Human Rights and Public Media; and **Mr. Defrim Methasani**, chairman of UPF-Albania.



The first panel was moderated by **Hon. Klajda Gjoshaj**, former Albanian minister of European Integration, chair of IAPP-Albania, and the conference organizer. The discussion examined how governments, parliaments and media stakeholders can strengthen media freedom and pluralism while responding to the challenges posed by artificial intelligence and digital platforms.



Panelists included **Hon. Iris Luarasi**, vice chair of the Parliamentary Commission on Human Rights and Public Media; **Ms. Armela Krasniqi**, chairwoman of the Audiovisual Media Authority; and **Hon. Aleksandër Çipa**, president of the Union of Albanian Journalists. Distinguished guests from across the region included **Hon. Danijela Đurović**, former speaker of the Parliament of Montenegro; **Hon. Enver Hoxhaj**, former deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs of Kosovo; and **Hon. Jovan**

Jovanović, former Serbian parliamentarian and former ambassador to Indonesia.



The second panel, moderated by **Ms. Mirilda Tili**, coordinator of the Media for Peace Committee of UPF-Albania, focused on "Media as a Bridge for Economic Cooperation in the Western Balkans." The discussion explored how responsible journalism and regional media cooperation can contribute to economic development and cross-border partnerships.



Mr. Thomas McDevitt, chairman of the board of the Washington Times – one of the conference partners – delivered a video message encouraging greater cooperation between media and business leaders in the Western Balkans and the United States. Additional speakers included **Hon. Senida Mesi**, former deputy prime minister of Albania; **Prof. Afet Mamuti**, professor of law at Tetovo University in North Macedonia; and **Mr. Lutfi Dervishi**, chairman of the Albanian Center for Quality Journalism. The panel concluded with a presentation by **Mr. Peter Zoehrer**, executive director of the Forum for Religious Freedom (FOREF) Europe, introducing UPF's International Media Association for Peace (IMAP), for which he serves as global coordinator.

Following the panel discussions, **Mr. Gani Rroshi**, secretary general of UPF-Balkans, invited Hon. Danijela Đurović of Montenegro and Hon. Jorida Tabaku of Albania to receive the UPF Ambassador for Peace Award in recognition of their contributions to peacebuilding and public service.



The conference concluded with closing remarks by Mr. Jacques Marion, who invited participants to support the second Mitrovica Youth Summit for Peace, to be held in Kosovo next October. The summit will bring together young Serbian and Albanian leaders from the communities of North and South Mitrovica, the symbolic dividing line at the heart of one of the Balkans' most enduring conflicts.



The conference also provided an opportunity for a meeting of the Balkans Working Group, an initiative of IAPP Europe and the Middle East launched by IAPP Advisory Board Chairman **Hon. Keith Best** and Secretary General **Mr. Hod Ben Zvi**. The working groups bring together current and former parliamentarians around common policy challenges, fostering dialogue, developing practical solutions, and formulating recommendations for their respective national institutions.

The gathering in Tirana brought together working group members from Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Looking ahead, participants agreed to continue their cooperation at a joint forum with youth leaders during the Mitrovica Youth Summit for Peace in October.