

# “Western Balkan Countries and EU Relations – Challenges and Perspectives”

Conference at the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna - Vienna School of International Studies

Vienna, Austria—Former Western Balkan heads of state, high-level officials and Balkans experts were the panelists at a one-day **conference at the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna-Vienna School of International Studies.**

The Balkan Leadership Conference of November 11, 2022, titled [“Western Balkan Countries and EU Relations – Challenges and Perspectives,”](#) was held jointly by the Europe-Middle East branch of the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) and the Podgorica Club of former heads of state of the Balkan Peninsula.

The approximately 150 participants included representatives from 17 embassies, scholars, and NGO representatives.

This event followed two UPF conferences on Western Balkan peace and security held in [April](#) and [June](#) of this year, co-sponsored by the Podgorica Club and the government of Kosovo, respectively.

In the context of the war in Ukraine and its impact on Western Balkan peace and security, respected statesmen from the region, as well as Austrian politicians and diplomats, offered their perspectives on the state of relations between the Western Balkans and the European Union.



[Video Opening Panel](#)

In his welcoming remarks, **Jacques Marion**, the UPF co-chair for Europe and the Middle East, expressed his appreciation to the respected statesmen from the Western Balkans and Austrian politicians and diplomats who had come to give their insights.

**Ambassador Emil Brix**, director of the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna, stated that as a result of the Ukraine war, we now tend to speak more urgently about the European security architecture and about making sure that the Western Balkans do not become front states in an ideological war between good and evil.

Ambassador Brix thanked the participants for coming to the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna. He praised the Podgorica Club for taking ownership of the situation in the region, and assured them of his continued support.

In recorded welcoming remarks, **Dr. Wolfgang Petritsch**, the president of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs, described the new situation that has arisen in Europe as a result of the Ukraine war and all the ripple effects in the region and beyond. He suggested that the Western Balkan nations should be included first in an accelerated process of accession to the European Union and encouraged all states that are already members of the EU to use their expertise and contribute to this process wisely. He concluded by saying that this conference in Vienna was taking place at the right time.

**Dr. Katsumi Otsuka**, Chair UPF Europe and Middle East, greeted everyone on behalf of UPF and expressed his gratitude that the conference could be held at such a distinguished place in Vienna. “The hope of all ages has been to experience peace and prosperity”, he said. However, especially during the past 25 years we have experienced how difficult it is to realize this. The Ukrainian war in particular has shown us that there is still a long way to go.



[!\[\]\(6059a5aa8b4ca7bb793408023d6c6e42\_img.jpg\) Video Session 1: The EU and NATO – European Security Architecture and the Position of the Western Balkans in Light of the Russian Aggression against Ukraine](#)

**Dr. Werner Fasslabend**, the president of the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, explained that there are three possibilities—enmity, rivalry, or friendship. One lesson learned from the situation in Ukraine is that only friendship can win! He predicted that this last attempt to attain an empire will come to an end soon and that this will bring about a new momentum with new structures and new ideas. Concerning membership of the European Union, Dr. Fasslabend suggested that those nations that have been waiting for some years should have the right to join at the same time as those that are showing an interest now, because of their acute situations.

**H.E. Alfred Moisiu**, president of Albania (2002-2007) and Balkans chairman of the UPF association International Summit Council for Peace, spoke of the instability in the fragile Balkan region caused by the war waged by Russia against Ukraine, with Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo being particular hot spots, but problems arising even in Montenegro. He gave an insightful explanation of the political situation in the region, saying that the EU member states do not fully realize how hazardous the situation is in the Western Balkans. He also cited the importance of understanding history before much-needed compromise and cooperation can be reached, as there are still historical issues of enmity that have not yet been addressed.


**H.E. Stjepan Mesić**, president of Croatia (2000- 2010), referred to the considerable consequences the current conflict has for the countries of Southeast Europe. If the economic situation worsens, the level of insecurity always rises, he said. The effects are felt in all of the European Union, and these are not short-term effects, but ones that will be felt for years to come. While stressing that the EU has a special responsibility for the stability of the so-called Western Balkans, he also emphasized the Open Balkan economic and political zone comprising Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia as a good path to a more stable future in Southeast Europe.

**H.E. Mladen Ivanić**, president of Bosnia-Herzegovina (2015-2017), explained how intertwined the situation is among the countries of the region. Being a Serb by origin, he shed light on the emotions of Serbia's population. They want to have all the comforts of belonging to the West, being close to the EU, he said, whereas the bombing of Belgrade in 1999 by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and NATO's support for the sovereignty of Kosovo, make them want to keep their distance from NATO. He expressed his hope that because of the situation in Ukraine, the EU might prioritize the accession of certain countries.

**Hon. Goran Svilanović**, Serbian minister of foreign affairs (2000-2004), stressed the role of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, whose goal has always been to maintain dialogue with Russia. He called on the EU to rethink its identity, not only concerning the Balkans or Eastern Europe but also to consider Northern Africa as part of Europe's identity. He suggested that the EU would have to be redefined once the war is finished, and pointed out that the EU already is losing lots of money because of the war and by not including the states of the Western Balkans in the union.

**H.E. Enver Hoxhaj**, the deputy prime minister of Kosovo (2017-2019), expressed that there was some expectation that there would be a shift of focus of the EU concerning the Western Balkans after the war, but we still have the same status quo since 2013 when Croatia joined the EU. He mentioned the necessity for *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or the work of reconciliation, as occurred between the Germans and Jews, but that there was no trace of this in the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. In concluding, he expressed his hope that there would be some push from Europe or the United States for his country's accession, as occurred with Montenegro in 2006.



 [Video Session 2: Western Balkans and the EU Accession Process Fatigue – Results, Responsibilities and Next Steps](#)

The second session was moderated by **Marinela Stefanc**, the secretary general of UPF-Austria.

**H.E. Filip Vujanović**, the president of the Podgorica Club and the president of Montenegro (2003-2018), presented an overview of the Podgorica Club, founded in Montenegro in February 2019. Referring to the next steps, he mentioned the Berlin Process set up by the EU to create a common regional market for the Western Balkans, which was agreed at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 2020. In November 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz sponsored the Berlin Process summit to reinstate the common regional market, which was signed by six Western Balkan states. Mr. Vujanović expressed his hope that it will benefit the local population and serve as a precondition to accelerate EU integration.

**H.E. Rexhep Meidani**, president of Albania (1997-2002), stated that NATO and EU accession are necessary for stability in the Western Balkans, and bemoaned the delayed EU integration process. Overall, the stalled EU accession process is a threat to democracy in the Western Balkans, Mr. Meidani said. He regards the Berlin Process as an opportunity for closer Balkan ties and a pillar for EU integration. Recently, six Western Balkan states agreed to facilitate free movement of citizens in the region and to grant mutual recognition of professional and academic qualifications. He concluded that this is crucial in easing tensions in the region and simplifying the accession process.

**Dr. Valentin Inzko**, the high representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina (2009-2021), emphasized in a video message the rule of law, justice, and the fight against corruption as core areas for improvement, to prevent the flight of young talented professionals from the Balkans. He highlighted three lessons learned: A mission should be completed based on the rule of law; frozen conflicts are potential trouble spots; a confrontational approach may be necessary to find solutions. To speed up the EU integration process, he recommended a type

of flight simulator activity by participating in EU meetings on existing strategies for climate and health without voting rights at first.

**H.E. Zlatko Lagumdžija**, the deputy prime minister of Bosnia-Herzegovina (2001-2002), mentioned the role of the high representatives in establishing peace in the Balkans since the Dayton Peace Accord in 1995. The Ukrainians' fight for freedom will ensure a united Europe, he said, and he anticipates the Western Balkans will join the EU by 2030. He is convinced that if the Western Balkans follow the Berlin Process, they could join the "European Economic Union" as a first step. Further possible steps include participation in the European Health Union and the European Green Deal. Unfortunately, many Balkan politicians lack interest in the EU, he said.

**H.E. Jadranka Kosor**, the prime minister of Croatia (2009-2011), referred to her visit to Brussels in 2009 as prime minister, where she found an EU tired of enlargement. The European Commission imposed stricter criteria on Croatia, incorporating Chapter 23, which required cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague in the judicial area in the fight against corruption and crime. Her government met all the requirements and signed the accession treaty in 2011. Leaders therefore should try harder to meet the requirements, she said, particularly in the fight against corruption and upholding the rule of law.



**Hon. Lukas Mandl**, a member of the European Parliament from Austria, stated that Europe is suffering from fatigue about its own destiny, particularly in relation to the Western Balkans. Referring to February 24 as a wake-up call, he stated that many are still asleep as the EU lacks courageous leadership who are prepared to take risks. He alluded to the vision of the late Austrian Vice Chancellor Erhard Busek, who desired that the Western Balkans join the EU together. EU membership for the Western Balkans is vital for European security and for Europe's international leverage, Mr. Mandl said. This meeting was a call to action to offer the next generation a fully integrated Europe, he said.

**Dr. Michael Balcomb**, a senior advisor to UPF for Europe and the Middle East, reminded the audience of the 60<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly in New York in 2005, when UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan questioned its role. Simultaneously, at the founding of UPF in 2005, Dr. Sun Myung Moon highlighted the fundamental problem with the UN and all political institutions: Nations place self-interests first. Dr. Balcomb mentioned Dr. Moon's practical vision for peace – a highway linking Asia across the Bering Strait to the United States, which Dr. Moon argued would be less costly than war. Alluding to Mother Moon's visit to Tirana, Albania, in 2019, Dr. Balcomb recalled her motto—"Forgive, Love, Unite"—as a way to solve problems.



### [Video Session 3: Youth, Peace and Security in Western Balkans – Moving Forward with the Energy and Optimism of the Next Generation](#)

The third session was moderated by **Jennifer Miftarofska** from the Austrian chapter of International Association of Youth and Students for Peace (IAYSP), an organization that is affiliated with UPF.

**Slobodan Martinović**, advisor to the former president of Montenegro, H.E. Filip Vujanović, described the atmosphere in which he and the youth of his generation grew up after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. He mentioned three main challenges: changing the educational system to meet the standards of developed countries; resolving the unemployment problem, especially among young people; and the brain drain, in which young people are forced to find their future in Western countries and the United States. Greater cooperation between the Western Balkan countries and the EU is needed to resolve these problems, he concluded.

**Aleksandar Savović**, the chief of cabinet of former President Mladen Ivanić of Bosnia-Herzegovina, said the EU did not really have any strategy for dealing with the Balkans after the war. Rather than corruption, the main problem of the justice system is the immaturity of

the people doing the task, he said; the key to solving that is education. He said that more EU funding should go to educational projects within the Western Balkans, and that Bosnia-Herzegovina could become a pioneer and example for the rest of Europe. Logic and reason are needed to play a greater role in policy decisions, he concluded.

**Lirjetë Avdiu-Vejsa**, the chairwoman of the *KÂ* Cultural Association, Vienna, recounted her personal story: She is from Kosovo, but due to persecution, her family was forced to return to Montenegro, her father's country of origin. However, because of the limitations of the education system there, she eventually moved to Vienna to study, where she started to organize activities for the Albanian community. She expressed her hope that those who have benefitted from Western education will help their own countries in the future. Therefore, it is important to allow freedom of movement for the many bright, young people of the Balkans, she said.



**Kirsty Rancier** from Canada, the youth focal point for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, spoke about the UN's Youth, Peace and Security agenda, which stems from the groundbreaking Resolution 2250, adopted unanimously by the UN Security Council in 2015. She emphasized the importance of the UNODC's Youth Empowerment Accelerator Framework, which serves as a tool for UN entities to uphold the meaningful engagement of youth in different priority areas, allowing young people in the Western Balkans to contribute more.

**Bogdan Pammer** from Austria, the president of IAYSP for Europe and the Middle East, began with a quote from the founder of UPF and IAYSP, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, who as a child fled North Korea and found a new life building a community of peace. In 2020 she said: "We cannot move forward with human-centered thinking and ideology." Mr. Pammer explained that he had just returned from conducting a "Peace Designer Training" in cooperation with a large university in Pristina, Kosovo, where they discussed a great deal

about peace. He concluded by saying that true innovation is more likely to come from places in the Balkans than elsewhere.

The last speaker was **Luka Čekić**, an expert on the Western Balkans at the International Institute for Peace, Vienna, who reminded us of the late Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, who had the ability to motivate young people. We need leaders like this to come from inside the Western Balkans, rather than looking to the outside for solutions, Mr. Čekić said. The IIP has a Western Balkans Initiative with a Vision Plan 2030. One of its conclusions is the need for reconciliation, as was achieved with the German people after World War II. In conclusion, he stressed that there is no future without young people.

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