New World Disorder:
Disinformation, Distrust and Dismantling
of Democratic Norms

Kosovo
**Peace &
Democracy**
Summit

KPDS
REPORT 2025

NOVEMBER 24-26, 2025 AT HOTEL
EMERALD, PRISTINA

Table Of Content

Full Report - 4th Edition

Theme: New World Disorder: Disinformation, Distrust and Dismantling of Democratic Norms

Venue: Emerald Hotel, Pristina

Dates: 24–26 November 2025

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1. Introduction

The 4th edition of the Kosovo Peace and Democracy Summit (KPDS), held from 24 to 26 November 2025 in Pristina, took place under the theme "New World Disorder: Disinformation, Distrust and Dismantling of Democratic Norms." Building on the foundations laid in previous editions, KPDS 2025 once again brought together more than 100 participants, including civil society actors, policymakers, diplomats, researchers, and media professionals from Kosovo, the wider Western Balkans, and the European Union.

KPDS is jointly organized by three Kosovo-based civil society organizations, namely the New Social Initiative (NSI), the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), and Sbunker. Organizational efforts for the 2025 Summit included close cooperation with the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and the CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, as well as generous support from international partners, including the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS). Their support underscores a shared commitment to democratic resilience and regional peacebuilding.

A distinctive feature of the 2025 edition was the explicit acknowledgment of fatigue among activists and experts, described as the "exhaustion of the good guys": despite years of effort, many feel conditions have worsened even as they remain committed to dialogue and peacebuilding. This mood of frustration and uneasy humor framed many of the discussions.

2. Key Takeaways

The Fragility of Democratic Norms: Democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans is gradual, not sudden: executives test constitutional limits, media are politicized, and laws are enforced selectively until once-intolerable practices become normal. Legacies of the 1990s conflicts, unresolved status questions, and a weak rule of law make institutions easy to capture. When scandals rarely bring accountability and courts appear politically influenced, citizens lose trust, turning to disinformation and conspiracy narratives, thinning the line between competitive politics, deep instability, and long-term democratic decay.

Dialogue Remains Non-Negotiable: The Kosovo-Serbia dialogue is essential, but it must be more credible, inclusive, and transparent. The summit distinguished elite-driven negotiations from genuine societal dialogue that recognizes competing narratives, addresses grievances, and imagines shared futures. Without this, agreements risk remaining "peace on paper." Progress will be judged by concrete issues such as diplomas, language rights, security, and representation. The prevailing "if they don't move, we won't" logic stalls implementation. Each side must honor commitments, and courageous leadership can break cycles of mutual blame.

Civil Society as the Backbone of Peacebuilding: Civil society organizations conduct research, fact-check, monitor agreements, and sustain youth- and women-led peace initiatives, making them central to democratic resilience. Yet they operate under chronic underfunding, rigid project frameworks, heavy bureaucracy, and, at times, intimidation, resulting in deep emotional and professional fatigue. Funding often flows through large international intermediaries, leaving local groups with small, earmarked grants and disproportionate reporting burdens. More direct, flexible support is needed, particularly for youth and women, whose perspectives are crucial to imagining cooperative regional futures.

The Rising Threat of Narrative Warfare: Narrative warfare shapes the region's information space: in Kosovo and Albania, disinformation spreads on TikTok and Telegram, while in Serbia, traditional state-aligned media dominate. External actors, such as Russia, exploit these systems, but domestic elites often drive the spread of manipulative content. Emotional, simplified stories weaponize existing ethnic, religious, and generational fractures, creating "parallel realities" with no shared factual baseline. This deepens polarization, hampers conflict resolution, strains friendships and families, and silences moderate voices who risk being branded "traitors" or "extremists" for challenging dominant narratives.

Regional Futures Dependent on Trust-Based Cooperation: The region's future depends on trust-based cooperation within and between societies, where peace means active cooperation, mutual recognition, and credible institutions. EU enlargement remains crucial but is marked by mixed signals: momentum for some, delays and inconsistencies for others, risking disillusionment and alternative geopolitical projects. Meanwhile, everyday normalization, such as frequent border crossings or technical cooperation, quietly advances coexistence. Protecting these gains requires rule-of-law reforms, media freedom, critical digital literacy, and responses to socioeconomic anxieties that deliver visible improvements in daily life.

3. KPDS 2025
A Recapitulation

3.1. Day 0 - Dinner Talks: Setting the Tone

The summit informally began on Day 0, November 24, 2025, with Dinner Talks organized in cooperation with the Kosovo Civic Alternative and supported by the European Institute for Peace. This invitation-only evening brought together voices from across the Western Balkans and Europe to reflect on how to rebuild trust and civic engagement in an era when disinformation and polarization are reshaping political life.

The discussions underscored two ideas that would resonate throughout the summit: first, that cooperation and dialogue remain indispensable, even when they feel exhausting; and second, that civic actors must continue to defend democratic norms at a time when they can no longer be taken for granted. The evening set a reflective yet determined tone for the days ahead.

3.2. Day 1 - Welcome Remarks and Theme

Day 1, November 25, 2025, opened with participant registration, followed by a plenary session featuring welcome remarks, an opening speech, and a keynote address.

"The fruits of our cooperation are few, but they are sweet. And they give us the energy to look past the constant exhaustion of watching things grow more disorderly each day."

Jovana Radosavljević, Executive Director of New Social Initiative, spoke candidly about the "exhaustion of the good guys," who have spent years trying to keep dialogue alive amid worsening political conditions. She likened civil society to a single firefly in a dark night that continues to shine. However, she noted that many activists feel "things have only gotten worse," even as they continue to insist on dialogue and human dignity. Her remarks stressed that, amid rising conflict and disinformation, the role of those who insist on dialogue and human dignity is even more vital.

"KCSS has been working tirelessly [...] to provide a rational dialogue about the challenges our region faces, and we hope this event will enrich that dialogue among civil society actors, experts, and policymakers."

Mentor Vrajolli, Executive Director of the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, highlighted disinformation, distrust, and the erosion of democratic norms as defining threats in the region. He framed KPDS as a space for rational dialogue, where experts and civil society actors can address topics often ignored in official negotiations. Vrajolli urged participants to view the summit not only as a forum for analysis but also as an opportunity for networking and "joint efforts towards democratic dialogue," noting that the environment in which civil society operates is becoming "more challenging by the year."

"Every year we gather with the stubborn belief that dialogue still matters, that critical thinking is worth defending, and that societies like ours, small, fragile, yet somehow fiercely resilient, don't have to accept the scripts that are written for them."

Bardhi Bakija, Executive Director of Sbunker, described the current context as a "new world disorder" in which political realities are increasingly shaped by narrative engineering. He warned that the Western Balkans have become a testing ground for information warfare, where disinformation is used as a governing tool and where narratives do not merely shape reality but seek to replace it. Bakija emphasized that clarity in naming problems is the first step toward reclaiming agency, arguing that societies have "grown allergic to naming clear problems" and that this reluctance to speak plainly about sources of instability further entrenches power imbalances.

Together, these welcome messages framed the summit as an honest confrontation with uncomfortable trends, coupled with a steadfast belief that dialogue and critical thinking remain worth defending.

3.3. Opening Speech - Aivo Orav

"Peacebuilding is not an abstract concept; it is the daily work of building trust, reducing tensions, and creating opportunities for all citizens."

The opening speech was delivered by Aivo Orav, the European Union Ambassador to Kosovo. Ambassador Orav noted that societies across Europe are navigating "unprecedented challenges" that would have been difficult to imagine as the focus of such a summit only a decade ago. He pointed to disinformation campaigns that exploit social divisions, erode trust, and undermine civic engagement.

Focusing on Kosovo, he emphasized that the country's information space remains vulnerable to external interference and that critical thinking and source verification are not systematically integrated into public education, leaving citizens highly exposed to manipulation. He stressed that fact-checking capacities, while growing, remain limited and need sustained support.

Turning to the broader EU perspective, Orav described enlargement as a "strategic investment for the entire continent" that remains real, credible, and achievable, but only with serious commitment from both the EU and candidate countries. He underscored the rule of law, transparency, and media freedom as preconditions for Kosovo's European path, insisting that they are foundations for a prosperous future rather than obstacles imposed from outside.

Ambassador Orav concluded by stating that the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans "has deepened, not weakened" and that regional dialogue and reconciliation are indispensable to reducing tensions and advancing integration.

3.4. Keynote Address - Stephen B. Heintz

"[…] RBF has long believed that the path to peace and democracy begins not only in negotiation rooms or in capital cities but in communities, in the courage of citizens, and in the networks of trust they build."

The keynote address was delivered by Stephen B. Heintz, President and CEO of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Heintz situated the Western Balkans within a global landscape marked by democratic backsliding, rising authoritarianism, and what he described as the distorting power of digital disinformation.

He argued that democracy is never a finished project but must be "renewed and reinvented generation by generation, moment by moment." For Heintz, the existence of KPDS is testament to the conviction that there remains both a moral order worth defending and a political order worth reimagining. He underscored that democracy depends on citizens' habits of participation, empathy, and accountability, and that civil society is indispensable in nurturing them.

Addressing Kosovo's specific context and the region, Heintz stressed that there can be no lasting peace in Kosovo without genuine dialogue between Albanians and Serbs. He distinguished between negotiations, which may largely involve elites and produce formal documents, and deeper dialogue processes that belong to societies and demand listening, empathy, and the courage to forgive. Drawing on comparative experiences from South Africa and Northern Ireland, he underlined that history cannot be rewritten but can be transcended.

Heintz also reflected on civil society fatigue and resource scarcity, noting that the same resilience that helped the region rebuild after war is once again required, not only to defend democracy but also to reimagine it in more inclusive and participatory forms. He echoed several earlier interventions, acknowledging the "very real fatigue" among activists while insisting that this fatigue itself is a reason for solidarity and renewed investment.

3.5. One-on-One Conversation - Dialogue in an Age of Narrative Warfare

The first one-on-one exchange of the day covered the question "Can the Kosovo-Serbia Normalization Dialogue Survive in a Context Increasingly Shaped by Narrative Warfare and Ambiguity?"

Moderator: Senad Šabović, Senior Advisor at the European Institute for Peace

Panelist: Andreja Slomšek, Political Adviser to the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue

Slomšek emphasized that, despite a challenging political environment, the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue remains active and anchored in the broader EU integration framework. She outlined four key areas of focus:

1. **Implementation of the Ohrid Agreement**, viewed as a central test of credibility for Kosovo, Serbia, and the EU alike.
2. **Sustained de-escalation**, including steps that go beyond the institutional withdrawal of 2022 and build on more peaceful local elections in northern Kosovo.
3. **Economic normalization**, illustrated by the approximately seven million crossings of the Kosovo–Serbia border in 2023–2024, demonstrating tangible benefits for citizens.
4. **Humanitarian issues**, especially the fate of around 1,600 missing persons, should not be allowed to be blocked by political disputes.

Both Slomšek and Šabović addressed the perception that the dialogue is losing momentum. They noted that while incidents and political crises have periodically disrupted the process, the EUSR's consistent engagement has helped keep communication channels open and prevent deeper escalation.

A key theme of the conversation was the "interconnectedness" logic, the idea that one side's lack of progress justifies inaction by the other. Citing regional leaders such as Albanian President Edi Rama and EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue Christian Sørensen, Slomšek argued that each side must deliver on its own commitments without imposing new preconditions. The concluding message was clear: the dialogue is not a burden but a tool and a necessary pathway toward a more stable and European future for both Kosovo and Serbia.

3.6. Panel 1 - Ethno-Politics Reloaded: Radicalization, Security, and Regional Futures

Panel 1 examined the resurgence of ethno-political radicalization and its implications for security and cooperation in the Western Balkans.

Moderator: Frauke M. Seebass, Visiting Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Panelists:

-Bojan Elek, Journalist and Policy Analyst
-Agon Maliqi, Nonresident Senior Fellow with the Atlantic Council's Europe Center
-Dr Bojana Zorić, Policy Analyst for the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighborhood at the EU Institute for Security Studies

The discussion painted a picture of a region entering a highly volatile period, with Bojan Elek describing significant internal changes in Serbia, where an increasingly centralized and authoritarian system prioritizes regime survival over regional engagement. He noted that state-aligned media play a major role in maintaining a narrative that discourages dissent and external scrutiny, and that individuals who step too far outside official rhetoric often face practical constraints, including difficulty leaving the country or working freely. Nonetheless, Elek identified the emerging student-led democratic movement as a rare but hopeful opportunity for internal democratization.

Agon Maliqi focused on the psychological and political impact of stalled EU integration. He described a "depressive energy" in the region stemming from the gap between the promise of accession and the reality of slow or blocked progress. EU accession was expected to render borders increasingly irrelevant yet debates about borders and status are resurfacing as central political issues. Maliqi warned that treating the Western Balkans primarily as a "containment area" rather than a community on a clear membership path risks fueling disillusionment and reopening old questions.

Dr. Bojana Zorić highlighted the geopolitical uncertainties surrounding EU enlargement, particularly the impact of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. While this has returned enlargement to the strategic agenda, it has also made timelines more fluid. She emphasized that the EU's credibility is at stake: if it fails to meet political signals with substantive action, trust in the enlargement process will further deteriorate. Zorić argued that regional stability does not depend solely on EU enlargement, which has always been complemented by NATO and US engagement, but that enlargement remains a powerful tool for consolidating democracy and the rule of law.

Overall, the panel underscored a tension between rising pressures toward radicalization and a still-present, but fragile, European perspective. Without credible steps forward, radical narratives risk gaining further ground.

3.7. Panel 2 - From Within and Without: How Malign Narratives Shape the Western Balkans

Panel 2 examined disinformation and malign narratives as drivers of polarization and democratic erosion.

Moderator: Dr Lura Pollozhani, Researcher at the University of Graz, Austria

Panelists:

-Gentianë Paçarizi, Media Researcher and Managing Editor at Kosovo 2.0
-Marko Savković, Senior Advisor at ISAC Fund
-Filip Stojanovski, Director for Partnership and Resource Development at Metamorphosis

Gentianë Paçarizi described disinformation as a layered strategic machinery that exploits institutional and social gaps. She explained how complex political episodes are routinely reduced to emotionally charged, simplified stories tailored for rapid circulation, especially on social media. This dynamic encourages political spectacle over careful analysis and makes it difficult for citizens to sustain a critical perspective.

Paçarizi also emphasized that Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs rarely encounter each other's media except during moments of crisis, when coverage tends to confirm existing fears and stereotypes. This lack of a shared factual baseline makes it easier for malicious actors to portray the other community as an existential threat. The researcher further cited work on TikTok manipulation of Kosovo elections, noting that around 18,000 videos were posted in just two days, reaching millions of users and demonstrating how easily political debates can be hijacked through entertainment-style content and hashtag hijacking.

Marko Savković discussed Serbia's information landscape, noting that while Russia is often portrayed as a major source of disinformation, domestic media ecosystems play a central role in amplifying and normalizing distorted narratives. Traditional media have contributed to a situation in which many citizens no longer know whom to trust. He observed that the term "democracy" has acquired negative connotations in some circles, prompting citizens to seek alternatives framed in terms of "order" or "stability."

Filip Stojanovski offered a regional lens, explaining how malign narratives exploit divisions along religious, ethnic, and generational lines. He noted that certain messages—such as those advocating BRICS as an alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration—have limited resonance among Albanians because of historical memory and existing pro-Western orientations. Nevertheless, he stressed that the region's structural weaknesses, including gaps in educational quality, media freedom, and digital literacy, leave societies vulnerable.

Together, the panelists argued that tackling disinformation requires more than fact-checking; it demands systemic solutions: better education, independent media, and a stronger democratic culture. They also noted the interpersonal costs of disinformation, highlighting anecdotes of friendships strained by media-fueled polarization and the growing difficulty of maintaining moderate positions without being immediately labeled or attacked.

3.8. Panel 3 - CSO Participation in the UN Peacebuilding Architecture

Panel 3, organized in partnership with the CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, focused on the role of Western Balkans civil society within the UN peacebuilding architecture and on the upcoming Western Balkans CSO UN Sub-Regional Dialogue on Peacebuilding.

Moderator: Jibecke Joensson, Head of EU and UN Affairs, CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation

Panelists:

-**Ramadan Ilazi,** Head of Research at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies
-**Tatjana Milovanović,** Program Director at the Post-Conflict Research Center
-**Stephen O'Malley,** United Nations Development Coordinator in Kosovo
-**Aleksandar Rapajić,** Program Director at the Advocacy Center for Democratic Culture

Ramadan Ilazi reflected on lessons from UN-level discussions, emphasizing that prevention must start locally or it will not start at all. He criticized funding models that route resources primarily through international intermediaries, leaving local organizations with limited agency and flexibility, and called for de-bureaucratized, corruption-resistant funding that supports locally owned initiatives, including women-led and youth-led efforts.

Tatjana Milovanović drew on experiences from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where civil society has played a crucial role in atrocity prevention and memory work, including initiatives related to the Srebrenica genocide. She highlighted that civil society often steps into the vacuum left by hesitant or divided political institutions and that its perspectives need to be structurally integrated into UN processes rather than treated as an afterthought. Milovanović also connected peacebuilding debates to rising femicide rates and failures to adequately implement the Women, Peace and Security agenda at the local level, stressing that these are not "side issues" but central indicators of institutional health.

Stephen O'Malley outlined the three pillars of the UN peacebuilding architecture: the Peacebuilding Commission, the Peacebuilding Support Office, and the Peacebuilding Fund, and noted ongoing efforts to anchor peacebuilding financing within the UN's regular budget. He underscored that sustainable peace requires bottom-up trust-building and that civil society should be considered a partner in designing and implementing UN peacebuilding strategies. Aleksandar Rapajić stressed that while civil society often feels it takes "one step forward and two steps back" amid political setbacks, its comparative advantage lies in credibility and proximity to communities, especially youth. He shared experiences with youth programs in which, when given space to meet, young people quickly move from inherited narratives of difference to discovering shared concerns and aspirations. This shift has reached parents as well: initial suspicion of cross-community activities has given way to active encouragement of their children to join, showing how grassroots peacebuilding can gradually reshape social norms.

The session concluded that Western Balkans experiences in peacebuilding have much to contribute to global debates, provided that UN structures create space for genuine co-creation with civil society and that funding flows are reshaped to align with the rhetoric of "local ownership."

3.9. Side Event - Youth Voices in Dialogue

Between Panels 3 and 4, a short yet impactful side event, "Youth Voices in Dialogue - Networking Session with Young Researchers Supported by the National Endowment for Democracy," provided an informal platform for early-career researchers and activists. While not a formal panel, this session reinforced themes from other discussions: the importance of inter-generational exchange, the need to provide young people with concrete opportunities to contribute, and recognition that they often approach regional issues with less historical burden and greater openness to cooperation. A special emphasis here is on the essentiality of providing "other stories" and real opportunities - educational, professional, and civic - so that young people are not left to choose between apathy and extremism.

3.10. Panel 4 - On Track or Left Behind: Who from the Western Balkans Is Going to Catch the 2030 EU Integration Train

Panel 4 examined the geopolitical and institutional dynamics of EU enlargement toward the Western Balkans.

Moderator: Marko Prelec, Consulting Senior Analyst on the Balkans at the International Crisis Group

Panelists:

-**Arjan Dyrmishi,** Executive Director and Founder of the Centre for the Study of Democracy and Governance
-**Valeska Esch,** Nonresident Senior Fellow with the Atlantic Council's Europe Center
-**Anamarija Velinovska,** Researcher at the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis"
-**Nevenka Vuksanović,** Director of the Center for Democracy and Human Rights

Arjan Dyrmishi described the EU's emerging timelines, including the potential for Montenegro and Albania to join around 2030, as ambitious and necessary but not self-executing. He argued that candidate countries must prepare seriously for membership, but that their efforts will bear fruit only if matched by genuine political will within the EU.

Valeska Esch warned of a widening gap between EU messaging and on-the-ground realities. While enlargement is rarely a contentious topic in public debates in some member states, it is not a priority, and there is a risk of overpromising to candidate countries without ensuring that institutions are ready. She called for caution about ideas such as "probationary membership" unless they are accompanied by clear rules and timelines.

Anamarija Velinovska raised concerns about the long-term credibility of enlargement, citing North Macedonia as a case where repeated delays and political hurdles have eroded public trust. She noted that the new EU multiannual budget will be a crucial indicator of the Union's seriousness about supporting enlargement and bridging development gaps.

Nevenka Vuksanović offered a perspective from Montenegro, often portrayed as a frontrunner in the process. She argued that, given its small size, NATO membership, strategic geopolitical position, and access to the Mediterranean, Montenegro is considered a feasible next member. At the same time, she acknowledged concerns about shortcomings in the rule of law and the risk that the EU might downplay these issues in pursuit of geopolitical ambitions. Functioning institutions and credible reforms, she insisted, remain essential, noting that while draft timelines and scenarios for Montenegro's accession already exist, they will be meaningful only if they are accompanied by real progress in judicial independence and anti-corruption efforts.

Overall, the panel agreed that enlargement could become a stabilizing force, but only if grounded in honest communication, consistent conditionality, and tangible support for democratic reforms. Otherwise, the perception that the Western Balkans are managed as a buffer or containment zone rather than as future EU members will become increasingly difficult to contest.

3.11. Night Owl Session - The Dialogue Nobody Believes In: Can It Be Fixed?

The Day 1 public program concluded with closing remarks, followed in the evening by a closed-door Night Owl session titled "The Dialogue Nobody Believes In - Can It Be Fixed?", moderated by Ian Bancroft, writer and former diplomat.

Under Chatham House rules, participants engaged in candid exchanges about the deep credibility crisis surrounding the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue. The discussions reflected many of the concerns raised earlier in the day: lack of transparency, confusion between negotiation and dialogue, and the perception that outcomes are often unclear or inconsistently implemented.
Participants underscored that "normalization" remains an undefined concept for many citizens. Questions ranged from practical matters, such as the recognition of diplomas, language rights, and the functioning of institutions in the north, to broader issues of whether communities feel safe and represented within state structures. There was sharp criticism of both Pristina and Belgrade for failing to communicate honestly about the aims, trade-offs, and limits of the process. Several contributors argued that political elites have often preferred ambiguity, using the dialogue instrumentally while leaving citizens confused and increasingly resentful.
The discussion further explored how narrative warfare shapes perceptions of the dialogue. In both societies, many people now view the process less as a path to problem-solving and more as a recurring source of crisis headlines and blame-shifting. The idea that "the mediator is more successful than the parties themselves" was raised, raising questions about local ownership and responsibility.

At a more personal level, several civil society representatives described their role as "the last men and women standing" for cross-community cooperation, often defending the very notion of dialogue in environments where it is portrayed as betrayal or weakness. Fatigue and anger with political elites were openly expressed, along with recognition that younger generations, less traumatized by war but increasingly alienated from formal politics, must be meaningfully involved if the process is to regain legitimacy.

Despite the somber tone, the session concluded by reaffirming that, despite fatigue and frustration, abandoning dialogue is not an option. Instead, the process must be reframed, opened to greater societal participation, and anchored in concrete, measurable improvements in people's daily lives.

3.12. Day 2 - Invitation-Only Activities

Day 2, November 26, 2025, was dedicated to invitation-only events organized by EPLO, the CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, and KCSS. These sessions further deepened discussions on peacebuilding, EU policy, and civil society cooperation, building directly on the themes from the public program.

4. Analysis: Vulnerabilities and Resilience

4.1. Key Vulnerabilities

4.1.1. Disinformation Ecosystems

The summit made clear that the Western Balkans are now deeply embedded in global disinformation dynamics and are also generating homegrown distortions. The vulnerabilities differ across contexts:

-In **Serbia**, traditional media with close ties to the authorities remain the primary amplifiers of state-aligned narratives. They contribute to an environment in which citizens are overwhelmed by conflicting information yet deprived of trustworthy sources.

-In **Kosovo and Albania**, **social media platforms**, including TikTok and Telegram, are key vectors for the rapid spread of emotionally charged content. Coordinated campaigns, including those that hijack hashtags and blend entertainment with political messaging, have shown the ability to shape electoral and public debates within days.

-Across the region, **external actors**, notably Russia, exploit these ecosystems, but **domestic political players** are often the most active producers and promoters of manipulative content.

The net effect is the proliferation of parallel informational realities, in which individuals inhabit distinct cognitive worlds shaped by their media diets and varying levels of media literacy. This makes it difficult to establish even a minimum level of consensus on the facts, which in turn undermines democratic deliberation and complicates conflict resolution.

4.1.2. Weak Institutional Credibility

A second major vulnerability concerns institutional credibility. Participants repeatedly cited low trust in parliament, government, courts, and regulatory bodies. This distrust is both a cause and a consequence of democratic backsliding.

Political elites often benefit, at least in the short term, from portraying institutions as instruments of their own power rather than as neutral guardians of the public interest. When scandals are rarely followed by accountability and when judicial outcomes are widely perceived as politically influenced, citizens have little reason to view institutions as reliable arbiters.

In such an environment, disinformation can more easily gain traction. Citizens who do not trust official channels are more likely to turn to alternative sources, some of which may be explicitly conspiratorial or aligned with malign external actors. At the same time, authorities' attempts to counter disinformation may be met with skepticism if perceived as partisan.

4.1.3. Ethnic Instrumentalization and Identity Politics

The summit highlighted the persistent instrumentalization of ethnic identities. Albanian and Serbian communities in Kosovo and across the region continue to view each other largely through the lens of crisis coverage. Political actors can leverage this dynamic to mobilize support or to distract from governance failures.

Malign narratives do not create ethnic tensions out of thin air; they exploit underlying grievances, historical memories, and unresolved questions about status and representation. Yet by constantly framing incidents as ethnic clashes rather than as governance or socioeconomic issues, they entrench zero-sum thinking and make cross-ethnic cooperation politically costly.

The lack of a shared factual baseline, that is, common, verified understandings of key events, further entrenches these divisions. When each community perceives itself primarily as a victim, acknowledging the suffering of others becomes politically sensitive, even though such acknowledgment is essential for reconciliation.

4.1.4. Enlargement Uncertainty and Geopolitical Flux

A further structural vulnerability lies in the uncertain trajectory of EU enlargement. While recent political statements and policy documents have reignited debates about new members by 2030, especially regarding Montenegro and Albania, the path remains unclear.

For countries such as North Macedonia, recurrent delays despite substantial reforms have created a perception that the "European promise" may never fully materialize. In such contexts, skepticism about the EU's intentions is rising, even among pro-European constituencies. This skepticism creates political space for alternative projects and narratives, including those promoted by external actors seeking to reduce EU and NATO influence in the region.

At the same time, participants noted that the EU faces internal challenges and geopolitical pressures, including the impact of the war in Ukraine. These factors complicate enlargement decision-making and timelines, even when goodwill exists on both sides.

4.1.5. Funding and Resource Constraints for Peacebuilders

Finally, the summit exposed the resource and structural constraints facing civil society organizations. Despite their central role in defending democratic norms and promoting dialogue, CSOs often operate within rigid, project-based funding schemes that constrain flexibility and long-term planning.

Many donors channel funding through large international intermediaries, leaving local actors with smaller, more restricted grants. Application and reporting requirements can be disproportionately burdensome, especially for smaller organizations and youth initiatives. This situation contributes to the fatigue and burnout described in the opening remarks and echoed in the keynote.

When those most committed to democratic values feel overextended and unsupported, the region risks losing key drivers of positive change.

4.2. Sources of Resilience

4.2.1. A Strong, Diverse Civil Society Ecosystem

Despite these vulnerabilities, KPDS 2025 also highlighted substantial sources of resilience. Foremost among them is the region's vibrant civil society. Organizations across Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania conduct research, advocate, fact-check, facilitate community dialogue, and provide peace education.

Civil society's proximity to communities and relative independence from shifting political cycles enable it to respond quickly to local tensions, expose disinformation, and hold authorities accountable. Many CSOs have built transnational networks, enabling cross-border learning and joint advocacy at the EU and UN levels.

4.2.2. Youth as Drivers of Change

Young people emerged as another major source of resilience. Many express fatigue with nationalist rhetoric and, when engaged in joint projects, quickly move beyond inherited divisions to focus on shared concerns such as employment, education, climate, and mobility. When given opportunities to engage in dialogue and joint projects, they quickly transcend inherited divisions and focus on shared concerns.

However, this potential will be realized only if youth are given meaningful roles in decision-making processes and are not confined to symbolic participation. The Youth Voices networking session demonstrated strong interest in such engagement and in the added value of youth-led research and advocacy.

4.2.3. Everyday Normalization and Regional Cooperation

The summit drew attention to everyday forms of normalization that often receive less visibility than high-level political disputes. Millions of border crossings between Kosovo and Serbia, the resumption of technical cooperation, and participation in local elections in northern Kosovo indicate that, at the societal level, many people are already living aspects of normalization.

These developments demonstrate that cooperation need not wait for the resolution of all political questions. Instead, incremental improvements in mobility, trade, education, and municipal services can create facts on the ground that, over time, shift perceptions and expectations.

4.2.4. Continued EU Engagement

While enlargement uncertainties persist, the EU's continued engagement in the Western Balkans also serves as a source of resilience. The presence of the EU Special Representative for the dialogue, the work of EU member state embassies, and financial support for reforms and civil society all help maintain a European horizon for the region.

As Ambassador Orav underscored, enlargement is now seen not only as a normative project but also as a geostrategic imperative. This reframing creates opportunities for renewed commitment, provided it is matched by credible and transparent communication.

4.2.5. Growing Awareness of Narrative Warfare

Finally, there is growing awareness among decision-makers, journalists, and activists of the mechanisms and dangers of narrative warfare. Fact-checking initiatives, media literacy programs, and research on malign influence are expanding. This awareness does not neutralize disinformation, but it lays the groundwork for more sophisticated and coordinated responses that combine regulation, education, and support for independent media.

5. Recommendations

Based on the discussions and analyses at KPDS 2025, the following recommendations are addressed to governments in the region, the European Union, other international partners, and civil society organizations.

5.1. Strengthen the Democratic Culture

1. **Integrate critical thinking and media literacy into formal education,** including source verification and the identification of malign narratives, to equip future generations with the skills to resist external influence and disinformation.

2. **Reimagine democracy** not as a finished system but as a moral and political order worth defending. It can be achieved through continuous acts of renewal, shaped by participation, empathy, and a willingness to listen.

3. **Promote sustained, inclusive dialogue between Albanians and Serbs** that goes beyond elite-level negotiations and fosters mutual listening, empathy, and societal reconciliation.

5.2. Dialogue in an Era of Narrative Warfare

Based on the discussions and analyses at KPDS 2025, the following recommendations are addressed to governments in the region, the European Union, other international partners, and civil society organizations.

1. **Ensure the full and timely implementation of past accords**, including the Ohrid Agreement, as a crucial test of regional credibility and a means to counter narrative warfare, rebuild trust, and generate positive momentum for the Dialogue.

2. **Address the Dialogue's current loss of momentum** by meeting the demands for sustained peaceful de-escalation, economic normalization, and the treatment of humanitarian disputes.

3. **Both parties should focus on fulfilling their individual commitments to the Dialogue** to prevent stagnation and avoid situations where one side's inaction hampers overall progress.

5.3. Ethno-Politics and Radicalization

1. **Develop a regional media pledge** in which media outlets commit to avoiding inflammatory language, ethnic stereotyping, and unverified claims, particularly during crises and elections.

2. **Strengthen youth** by supporting democratic student movements as key actors against radicalization and by addressing current youth demoralization and political fatigue.

3. **Avoid reigniting old grievances and historical tensions** by treating the Western Balkans as a community on a clear path to membership rather than as a containment zone.

5.4. Malign Narratives Shaping the Western Balkans

1. **Enable citizens from all communities to maintain a critical perspective on media narratives** by challenging high-level political spectacles and providing careful analysis of potential disinformation.

2. **Prevent the national media from reinforcing stereotypes or amplifying fears**, and encourage reporting that builds trust, inclusivity, and inter-community understanding.

3. **Rebuild trust in democracy** by strengthening transparency, accountability, and civic engagement, and by returning to democratic values rather than transforming them into authoritarian governance.

5.5. CSOs in the UN Peacebuilding Architecture

1. **Establish flexible, locally controlled peacebuilding funds** with simplified application and reporting procedures, ensuring that small- and mid-size organizations can access the resources they need in a less bureaucratic environment.

2. **Institutionalize regular consultations between UN peacebuilding structures and regional CSOs,** shifting from ad hoc meetings and a passive monitoring role to active participation in negotiations, leveraging CSOs' proximity to communities and their capacity to fill gaps left by divided institutions.

3. **Support grassroots peacebuilding initiatives that leverage civil society's credibility and community proximity,** enabling societies to move beyond inherited divisions and gradually reshape social norms across generations.

5.6. Enlargement Futures

1. **Launch an EU–Western Balkans "clarity agenda"** that sets out realistic timelines, criteria, and political expectations for enlargement, helping manage public expectations and reduce room for speculation and manipulation.

2. **Prioritize rule-of-law reforms** through targeted technical assistance and conditionality focused on judicial independence, anti-corruption, and media freedom, while avoiding politically motivated delays once conditions are met.

3. **Ensure that the EU's multiannual budget reflects enlargement ambitions** and that the gap between the EU's messaging and on-the-ground realities is understood.

5.7. Rethinking Dialogue – Insights from the Night Owl Session

1. **Clarify the meaning and objectives of 'normalization' for citizens,** transparently communicating trade-offs and limits to prevent confusion, mistrust, and frustration with the dialogue process.

2. **Increase the meaningful participation of younger and future generations,** who are less stigmatized by the war, by giving them a central role to enhance legitimacy, revitalize the process, and look toward a more positive future.

3. **Prevent the dialogue from reinforcing propaganda or stereotypes** by ensuring it moves beyond a procedural problem-solving tool and does not become a recurring source of crisis headlines.

KPDS 2025 underscored that the Western Balkans face intensified disinformation, eroding trust and renewed questions about democratic futures, yet it highlighted the resilience of civil society, the constructive role of youth, and the continued relevance of the European project. The core message is sober but hopeful: there are no shortcuts to dialogue, cooperation, and trust, yet the choices leaders, institutions, and citizens make now will determine whether the region's challenges lead to fragmentation or to renewed democratic commitment and shared peace.

6. Conclusion: Navigating the New World Disorder

The 4th edition of the Kosovo Peace and Democracy Summit (KPDS) 2025 convened at a critical juncture, confronting a "new world disorder" defined by disinformation, distrust, and the erosion of democratic norms. The summit offered a candid assessment of the Western Balkans' vulnerabilities, acknowledging the fragility of institutions, fragmented media landscapes, and the instrumentalization of fear and identity by political elites. The gradual, insidious nature of democratic backsliding, magnified by the region's unresolved conflicts and weak rule-of-law frameworks, emerged as a central concern.

Yet KPDS 2025 highlighted significant sources of resilience. A vibrant civil society, including dedicated youth and women-led initiatives, continues to defend democratic space, expose malign narratives, and foster dialogue. Everyday acts of normalization, such as cross-border mobility and local cooperation, demonstrate grassroots commitment to a different future. The European Union's continued, albeit uncertain, engagement provides a crucial anchor, reinforcing the region's European perspective.

A key takeaway from the summit is that dialogue is not an accessory to peace but its infrastructure. The credibility crisis surrounding the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue underscores the urgent need for a reimagined process—one that is inclusive, transparent, and delivers tangible improvements in people's daily lives while actively countering narrative warfare. Participants did not shy away from expressing fatigue, disappointment, and anger toward both domestic elites and parts of the international community. For that reason, they called for greater honesty about limits, trade-offs, and responsibilities across all parties.

Ultimately, KPDS 2025 affirmed that the struggle for democracy and peace in the Western Balkans is an ongoing, dynamic process. It is sustained by activists' resilience, the forward-looking perspective of youth, and the collective understanding that peace is built through continuous effort, listening, and accountability. The summit's enduring message, as articulated by Stephen B. Heintz, is a call to action:
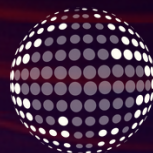
"We must remember that democracy is never finished, never fixed. It must be renewed and reinvented generation by generation, and sometimes even moment by moment."

Kosovo Peace & Democracy Summit

NEW WORLD DISORDER:

DISINFORMATION, DISTRUST AND DISMANTLING OF DEMOCRATIC NORMS

ORGANIZED BY:

NEW SOCIAL INITIATIVE

SBUNKER

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Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

IN COOPERATION WITH:

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