

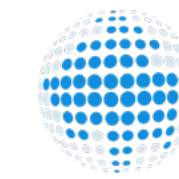
Call for Regional Solidarity

REPORT FROM 3RD EDITION OF THE KPDS

September 30 2024



Kosovo
Peace &
Democracy
Summit



KCSS
Kosovo Centre for Security Studies



Radical realities:
**Ethno-Political Dynamics and Euro-Atlantic
Integration in the Western Balkans**

September 25-26, 2024, P



About the KPDS

✧ What is KPDS?

The Kosovo Peace and Democracy Summit (KPDS) is a regional conference focused on strengthening dialogue and cooperation among civil society actors in the Western Balkans alongside experts and policymakers. It addresses the critical issues affecting democratic norms, peacebuilding, and Euro-Atlantic integration in the region. KPDS aims to create synergies across civil society in the Western Balkans to promote collective understanding and approaches that anchor the region firmly in the Euro-Atlantic norms and integration process. By examining issues like malign foreign influence, geopolitics, and security, KPDS shapes a conversation on the role of civil society in countering these threats and fostering peace, especially through greater interethnic cooperation.

✧ Who organizes KPDS?

KPDS is jointly organized by three key civil society organizations: **New Social Initiative (NSI)**, **Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS)**, and **Sbunker**. Together, these organizations develop the summit's program and oversee all aspects of its organization. The first edition of KPDS was held in 2022.

✧ Who is invited to attend KPDS?

The 3rd edition of KPDS brings together civil society leaders from the Western Balkans, think tank experts from the European Union, international representatives based in Kosovo, and officials from E.U. member states. Additionally, officials from Kosovo's public institutions and experts in

geopolitics, democracy, and peacebuilding are always invited to participate or speak. However, this year's summit focuses exclusively on facilitating dialogue between civil society groups in the Western Balkans and the European Union (E.U.), promoting regional cooperation and integration, an approach that has largely determined the composition of the panels.

✧ Who supports KPDS?

3rd edition of KPDS is generously supported by a range of international partners, including Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF), National Endowment for Democracy (NED), German Federal Foreign Office, SMART Balkans, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS-Kosovo), and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (through the Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub project).

✧ What does this year's theme mean?

The 2024 theme, **Radical Realities: Ethno-Political Dynamics and Euro-Atlantic Integration in the Western Balkans**, reflects the deepening divide between growing ethno-political radicalization and the region's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. We chose "Radical Realities" to emphasize the tension between rising nationalism, populism, and authoritarianism on one side and the declared commitment to democracy, peace, and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures on the other. Bridging this divide is very important for stability, security, and democratic resilience in our region.

Introduction

The 3rd edition of the Kosovo Peace and Democracy Summit (KPDS), held in 2024, focused on “*Radical Realities: Ethno-Political Dynamics and Euro-Atlantic Integration in the Western Balkans.*” The summit addressed the growing divergence between the increasing ethno-political radicalization in the region and the aspiration for Euro-Atlantic integration. This dynamic threatens peace, security, and democratic development. Organized by the New Social Initiative (NSI), Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), and Sbunker, the event gathered over 160 participants, including civil society leaders, experts, and policymakers from the Western Balkans and the European Union.

The summit started with welcome remarks from leaders of the three organizing institutions: the New Social Initiative (NSI), the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), and Sbunker. **Jovana Radosavljevic**, Executive Director of NSI reflected on the importance of resilience amid mounting political challenges: “*Despite rising political challenges, we continue to resist, grow, and prevail. Thanks to our partners, donors, and all of you, we keep dialogue channels open. Together, we fight for peace and democracy, putting citizens’ dignity first despite discredits, intimidation, and sabotage.*” **Mentor Vrajolli**, Executive Director of KCSS, reinforced KPDS’s role in promoting dialogue and normalization efforts between Kosovo and Serbia: “*KPDS is a platform that promotes track II diplomacy. We support normalizing*

relations between Kosovo and Serbia and fully back the implementation of the Agreement on the Path to Normalization of Relations known as the Ohrid Agreement.” **Bardhi Bakija**, Executive Director of Sbunker, emphasized the urgency of addressing the rise of nationalism: “*One of the most urgent challenges we face is the rise of ethno-nationalism and populism, especially among younger generations. These ideologies erode trust, sow division, and pull us further apart. The good news is that we are not powerless. KPDS2024 is an opportunity to have real conversations about what we can do right now.*”

Diplomatic figures also emphasized the summit’s importance. U.S. Ambassador to Kosovo **Jeffrey M. Hovenier** delivered a powerful message about the crucial role of civil society in shaping democracy: “*The energy to get the conversation started is here! Civil society organizations have been major change-makers worldwide. This gathering is about fostering cooperation coordination, and amplifying the voices of those who seek a normal life.*” Ambassador Hovenier reiterated the unwavering commitment of the United States to the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, with the ultimate goal being mutual recognition. He stated: “*For those of you who have been in Kosovo for some time, you are likely familiar with the consistent messages from the U.S. on how we view the situation and the efforts to advance the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, with the ultimate goal of mutual recognition. This remains the goal of the United*

States, plain and simple. We expect both governments to fully adhere to all the obligations they have undertaken in the dialogue and to approach the process with seriousness.”

Hovenier also emphasized that Kosovo’s path toward integration into key international organizations, including the European Union and NATO, cannot be achieved without recognition from all member states, many of which have not yet accepted Kosovo’s independence. He further remarked: *“As you know, some countries have yet to officially accept the reality of an independent, democratic, multiethnic Kosovo, as we have. You must convince them, and we want to help. But if you want to join the club, don’t mess with the rules of the club.”*

German Ambassador to Kosovo **Jörn Rohde** echoed Hovenier’s sentiments, underscoring that dialogue remains the key to regional stability. He highlighted the significance of forming the Association of Serb Municipalities (ASM) as a critical step in integrating the Serbian minority into Kosovo. Rohde stated: *“There is a new team in Brussels that will take over the enlargement portfolio, and I repeat this again and again: Kosovo must be active in relation to the ASM because it is a clear path to integrate the Serb minority in Kosovo and to show that this agreement is alive.”*

Rohde also criticized the use of extreme rhetoric in the political discourse of both Belgrade and Prishtina, noting that such language only exacerbates tensions and hinders normalization. He remarked: *“The continuous use of extreme terms like ethnic cleansing and repression when describing the situation in the North is unhelpful, as is the banning of civil society initiatives such as the ‘Mirdita, Dobar Dan’ festival in Serbia. Kosovar politicians use similar terms to describe the situation in the Preshevo Valley, and it’s clear that such rhetoric is counterproductive.”*

In addition, Rohde pointed out that the core obstacle to normalization remains a complete lack of political will from both sides: *“Serbia essentially defends the status quo, while Kosovo wants to change it, and rightly so. We also want a sovereign Kosovo member of NATO, the E.U., and the Council of Europe.”*

Ambassador **Aivo Orav**, Head of E.U. Office in Kosovo/E.U. Special Representative underscored the importance of E.U. enlargement for regional stability: *“The Western Balkans’ future is in the E.U. The enlargement process is more serious now than ever before. It’s not just a goal—it’s a geostrategic and moral imperative for Europe. As war returns to Europe, the importance of enlargement for stability and security cannot be overstated. January 1, 2027, will be a defining moment for the E.U. and the Western Balkans. Normalizing relations between Prishtina and Belgrade is key to the region’s future. We must be ready for what comes next.”*

KOSOVO-SERBIA NORMALIZATION DIALOGUE: DO WE NEED A RESET?

The first panel, moderated by **Milica Andrić Rakić**, Program Manager at NSI, addressed the current state of the Kosovo-Serbia normalization dialogue. The panel examined whether a reset was needed in the ongoing dialogue or if simply refocusing efforts would suffice. Since the dialogue began in 2011, numerous strategic shifts have led to a sense of stagnation. The panelists analyzed these shifts, the challenges of implementation, and the evolving role of both the E.U. and the U.S.

Dragiša Mijačić, Director at the Institute for Territorial Economic Development (InTER), outlined the deteriorating conditions for Kosovo Serbs: *“Kosovo Serbs are in a challenging reality. Over the past four years, we have seen the departure from political institutions, the erection of violent and peaceful barricades, and now, no resistance at all. The question is: What is the endgame? The Serbs are being pushed out of political participation. But is this good or bad for Kosovo? Ultimately, Kosovo will need Serbs for dialogue and integration.”*

Tefta Kelmendi, Deputy Director for the Wider Europe Programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), pointed out how the Kosovo government’s actions have inadvertently isolated the country from its international partners: *“The Kosovo government needed to distract the public from what was being discussed in the dialogue, which is why it took actions in the North. This strategy has backfired, leading to a delay in implementing the Ohrid Agreement.”*

Marko Prelec, Senior Analyst at the International Crisis Group (ICG), suggested a return to fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria: *“Maybe we don’t need a reset, but we need to go back to putting dialogue in the context of fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria for both Serbia and Kosovo. The heart of the dialogue—self-government for Serbs in Kosovo and recognition from Serbia—has been removed, and that is why we are at an impasse.”*

The panelists generally agreed that while a full reset may not be necessary, the current process requires refocusing on the dialogue’s fundamental aspects. This includes addressing the needs of the Serbian minority and ensuring that Kosovo remains engaged with its international partners. Without addressing these critical issues, the dialogue risks becoming a symbolic exercise rather than a meaningful path to normalization. Dialogue and regional solidarity will be crucial in ensuring that the process doesn’t stagnate and that peace remains attainable.



SUSTAINING EURO-ATLANTIC FOCUS ON THE WESTERN BALKANS

Moderated by **Dr. Ramadan Ilazi**, Head of Research at KCSS, this panel explored the challenges of maintaining Euro-Atlantic attention on the Western Balkans during global crises. The panelists discussed the impact of shifting geopolitical priorities, such as the war in Ukraine, and how these shifts might reduce the region's visibility on the international stage.

Helena Ivanov, Associate Research Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society, reflected on the challenges of keeping the Western Balkans in focus: *“The Western Balkans aren’t the center of attention, and only bad news tends to bring us to the forefront. We need to break free from the outdated lens of 1999. The international community must address the lack of implementation of agreements to improve the lives of citizens on the ground.”*

Valeska Esch, Senior Advisor to the Special Representative for the Western Balkans at the German Federal Foreign Office, emphasized Germany's commitment: *“Germany is committed to investing in the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova. However, the region must prove itself as a reliable partner. We must stop stalling and start implementing key agreements like the unified electricity market to move forward.”*

Agon Maliqi, an independent policy analyst, raised concerns about the fading optimism regarding E.U. enlargement: *“There’s a widening gap between cynicism and optimism on E.U. enlargement. Since Croatia’s entry, democracy and governance in the region have worsened, and the E.U.’s credibility on enlargement has eroded. A qualified majority vote in the Council could restore that credibility.”*

The panel concluded that while the Western Balkans face declining international attention, the region has opportunities to prove its value by implementing reforms and fostering regional cooperation and regional solidarity. The more the region can speak with one voice in Brussels, Berlin, and Paris, the more support there will be for the region. Civil society can play an essential role in maintaining focus on the region by becoming some sort of Representative of the region in E.U.’s key capitals through more direct engagement with stakeholders. Still, without meaningful progress, the region risks further marginalization.



TACKLING RUSSIAN AND CHINESE INFLUENCE

This panel, moderated by **Dr. Adelina Hasani**, Senior Researcher at KCSS, examined the growing geopolitical rivalries in the Western Balkans, particularly the roles of Russia and China. The discussion focused on how these powers leverage their influence in the region, often to the detriment of democratic institutions and stability.

Viktorii Voronina, Executive Director at the Center for Security Studies, highlighted Russia's destabilizing tactics: *"Russia is driven by security reasons to create hotspots and destabilize regions.*

It uses cultural NGOs as covers for disinformation campaigns, exploiting any means to disrupt stability."

Jeta Loshaj, researcher of malign foreign influence, discussed the complexities of Russian influence: *"Russian influence is both exaggerated and understated, depending on whom you ask. We do know that Russia has historical ties to the region, which it uses to its advantage in subtle and overt ways."*

Dr. Ana Krstinovska, from ESTIMA, discussed China's economic agenda: *"China is a global economic power, and its strategy in the Western Balkans is to protect its economic interests. It uses its hybrid tools to present itself as an alternative to the West, often creating dependencies through infrastructure projects and loans."*

Stefan Vladislavljev, Program Director at Foundation BFPE, added, *"From 2021, China became the single biggest investor in Serbia. In 2022, China's investments in Serbia equaled that of the entire EU27. This growing influence makes Serbia more dependent on Chinese investments, which raises concerns about democratic governance."*

The panel concluded that Russia and China are increasingly significant in the Western Balkans, each using different tactics to advance their interests. Weak governance and political instability exacerbate the region's vulnerability to external influence. To counter this, the Western Balkans must strengthen its democratic institutions and deepen its partnerships with the E.U. and NATO. However, the E.U. and NATO must also provide credible paths for greater integration of the region.



ANALYZING THE GROWTH PLAN'S POTENTIAL

Moderated by **Srđan Majstorović**, Chairman of the Governing Board of the European Policy Centre (CEP), this panel analyzed the potential impact of the E.U.'s Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. The Growth Plan, which seeks to address economic convergence and regional cooperation, was hailed as a critical step toward economic integration with the E.U.

Andi Dobrush, Executive Director of the Western Balkans Open Society Foundations, praised the Growth Plan's potential: *"The Growth Plan offers political momentum for the region, but we must be cautious about its downsides. Initiatives like the Open Balkan can politicize regional connectivity."*

Anja Quiring, Regional Director for Southeast Europe at the German Eastern Business Association, pointed to the region's brain drain problem: *"Young people are leaving the region due to limited job prospects. To attract foreign investment, we need a rule of law, legal certainty, and strong institutions to provide long-term economic opportunities."*

Stefan Ristovski, researcher at the European Policy Institute in Skopje, offered a measured assessment of the Growth Plan's potential: *"The initial hype around the Growth Plan has calmed, creating a more realistic view. The key to its success lies in political commitment, which remains a challenge in the region."*

The panel agreed that the Growth Plan presents a promising opportunity for the region to achieve economic convergence with the E.U. However, the plan's success hinges on the political will to implement necessary reforms. If the Western Balkans can overcome these challenges, the Growth Plan could significantly accelerate the region's economic and political integration with the E.U.



POLITICAL ELITES AND THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS: DO THEY WANT IT?

Moderated by **Dr. Simonida Kacarska**, Director of the European Policy Institute in Skopje, this panel examined the commitment of political elites in the Western Balkans to the European integration process. The panelists explored whether these elites are genuinely committed to E.U. accession or merely use it as a political tool without undertaking the necessary reforms.

Nikola Dimitrov, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, lamented the region's stagnation: *"The generational objective of E.U. integration is slipping away from us. We need more solidarity and commitment to the process, but political elites often prioritize short-term political gains over long-term reforms."*

Katarina Tadić, Programme Manager at the European Fund for the Balkans, highlighted the repressive tactics of certain governments: *"We are witnessing increasing repression in Serbia, where over 50 activists have been arrested in the past few months. This is not the behavior of a government committed to E.U. values."*

Visar Ymeri, Executive Director at the Institute for Social Policy Musine Kokalari, raised questions about Kosovo's understanding of E.U. values: *"We say we want to be in the E.U., but we don't fully understand the values that come with it. We resist regional cooperation, which is essential for our integration into the E.U."*

The panel concluded that while there is significant public support for E.U. integration in the Western Balkans, political elites often lack genuine commitment to the reforms necessary for accession. Without stronger political will and a deeper understanding of E.U. values, the region's integration prospects will remain elusive.



SUPER-ELECTION YEAR: REDEFINING THE GLOBAL LANDSCAPE

This panel, moderated by **Dr. Sonja Stojanović Gajić**, discussed the implications of upcoming elections in the U.S., Europe, and other key global players. The panelists explored how these elections could reshape international relations, particularly for the Western Balkans.

Maria Simeonova, Head of the Sofia office at the European Council on Foreign Relations, speculated on the impact of U.S. elections: *“Trump’s foreign policy will likely prioritize short-term deals and business interests, while Harris may continue a more values-driven approach. However, we must be cautious about the rise of emotional arguments in the E.U. enlargement debate, which often drown out rational discourse.”*

Lorenzo Conti, Senior Policy Officer at EPLO, pointed to Europe’s diminishing influence: *“European countries must prepare for a future where their global influence is reduced, especially as the U.S. pivots towards regions like Taiwan. The E.U. must develop a more cohesive foreign policy to remain relevant on the global stage.”*

Marko Savkovic, Senior Advisor at ISAC Fund, discussed the economic priorities of global powers: *“U.S. trade relations with China and the E.U. could shake the global economy, and we must be prepared for the consequences of these shifts. The E.U.’s optimism around enlargement is fading, which will directly affect the Western Balkans.”*

The panel concluded that upcoming elections, particularly in the U.S. and E.U., will significantly affect the Western Balkans. The region must be prepared to navigate these shifts in global priorities, as they will affect its prospects for integration and stability.



TACKLING DISINFORMATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Moderated by **Fitim Gashi**, Project Manager at Sbunker, this panel addressed the growing challenge of disinformation in the Western Balkans. The panelists discussed how disinformation campaigns undermine democratic processes and public trust in the region and how media literacy can be improved to combat this issue.

Tijana Cvijetićanin, Program Director at Zašto Ne, emphasized the role of social media in spreading disinformation: *“The problem is clicks over truth. Everyone posts what is clickable, not what is true. Political influence in the media further exacerbates the problem.”*

Ana Marija Ivković, Editor-in-Chief at Alternativna, noted the role of both Kosovo-Albanian and Serbian media in spreading misinformation: *“After the Banjska attack, we saw an escalation of misinformation. Both Albanian and Serbian media spread false narratives, worsening inter-ethnic relations.”*

Dr. Dren Gërguri, from the University of Prishtina, highlighted the repetitive nature of disinformation: *“The same false information keeps circulating, especially around inter-ethnic relations. If people act on this propaganda, it creates real-world consequences that are hard to reverse.”*

The panel concluded that disinformation seriously threatens democratic processes and social cohesion in the Western Balkans. Combating disinformation requires fact-checking and a multi-pronged approach that includes media literacy, civil society engagement, and more robust regulatory frameworks to hold platforms accountable.



CYBERSECURITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Moderated by **Hyrije Mehmeti** from the University of Prishtina, this panel explored Cybersecurity's current and future challenges in the Western Balkans. The region's increasing reliance on digital infrastructure has made it more vulnerable to cyber-attacks, disinformation, and other forms of malign influence.

Orkidea Xhaferaj, a cybersecurity expert, discussed the role of Cybersecurity in protecting digital rights: *“Cybersecurity is the gatekeeper for protecting our online freedoms. In Albania, digitalization is seen as a tool to fight corruption, but we must improve cyber-hygiene and technical skills to ensure success.”*

Filip Stojanovski, from the Metamorphosis Foundation, connected Cybersecurity to democracy: *“Cybersecurity and disinformation are systemic issues that require a society-wide response. Cyber-attacks aimed at critical infrastructure are meant to undermine public trust and democratic governance.”*

Hekuran Doli, a cybersecurity expert, emphasized the growing threat of artificial intelligence (A.I.): *“A.I. is increasingly being weaponized against investigative journalists, and many governments lack the intellectual capacity to address these threats. Young professionals are often left to fight these battles without adequate support.”*

The panel concluded that Cybersecurity is not just a technical issue but a democratic one. The region must invest in building stronger cybersecurity frameworks and improving public awareness about cyber risks. Regional cooperation will be essential in addressing these challenges, as cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns do not respect national borders.



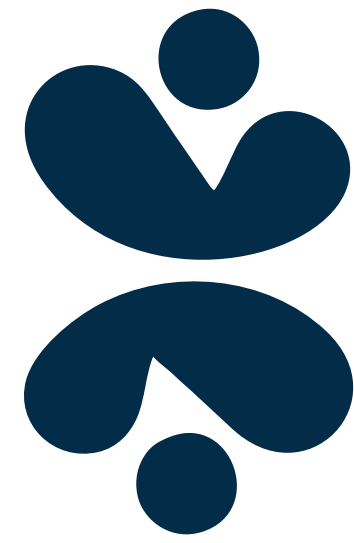
Conclusion: A Call for Regional Solidarity

The 3rd edition of the Kosovo Peace and Democracy Summit, gathering over 160 participants from the Western Balkans and the European Union, underscored the importance of regional solidarity in addressing the region's most pressing challenges. The summit's theme, *"Radical Realities: Ethno-Political Dynamics and Euro-Atlantic Integration in the Western Balkans,"* encapsulated the tension between rising ethno-political radicalism and the region's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. Throughout the summit, panelists, experts, and diplomats emphasized that without greater cooperation across borders, the Western Balkans will struggle to meet the challenges of the 21st century, from geopolitical rivalries and disinformation to economic stagnation and stalled E.U. integration.

The U.S. Ambassador to Kosovo, **Jeffrey M. Hovenier**, remarked, *"Our vision is a prosperous, multiethnic, and sovereign Kosovo, fully integrated into NATO and the E.U. But let's be clear: If you want to join the club, you cannot undermine its values."* This sentiment encapsulates the broader message of the summit: the Western Balkans must uphold democratic values, implement meaningful reforms, and engage in genuine dialogue to achieve its aspirations of Euro-Atlantic integration. KPDS is a crucial platform for these efforts, fostering dialogue, building trust, and helping the region navigate its complex path to peace and stability.

KPDS2024 made it clear that the path forward requires more than just political agreements—it demands a collective effort from civil society, governments, and international partners to foster peace, promote democratic governance, and work toward the region's Euro-Atlantic integration. Without this, the region risks being left behind, mired in nationalist politics and external influences that could undermine its stability and future. As Helena Ivanov aptly noted, *"We need to break free from the outdated lens of 1999 to make progress."* The summit reinforced the idea that the Western Balkans must take ownership of its future.

During the 3rd edition, KPDS was called to continue its work. The KPDS has become a critical platform for fostering dialogue between civil society and political actors in the Western Balkans. With over 160 participants from across the region and the E.U., the summit provided a space for open discussions on the region's challenges. The diverse panels and experts highlighted pressing issues, from geopolitical tensions to disinformation and Cybersecurity. KPDS matters because it helps build a more cohesive vision for the Western Balkans' future by fostering dialogue, bridging gaps between ethnic groups, and supporting the region's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. **Agon Maliqi** encapsulated this sentiment: *"There's renewed energy in the Western Balkans and the E.U., but it's fading—KPDS helps keep that energy alive."*



Kosovo Peace & Democracy Summit

