

24th INTERNATIONAL YOUTH CONFERENCE
European values for the future of SEE countries
24th – 27th of September, Krusevo, North Macedonia

CONFERENCE PROGRAM CONCEPT

At a moment marked by democratic fatigue, political polarization, digital fragmentation, and growing distrust between institutions and citizens, young people across the Western Balkans are increasingly searching for new ways to participate, cooperate, and shape public life. At the same time, the region stands at a decisive stage of its European integration: the renewed momentum of EU enlargement has placed the democratic fundamentals (rule of law, fundamental rights, functioning democratic institutions, accountable public administration and an enabling civic space) at the very centre of the accession process.

The 2026 International Youth Conference positions youth as participants within democratic systems and active co-designers of the region's future cooperation architecture and of its path towards the European Union. The conference is built on a simple premise: the values that determine whether EU accession succeeds are the same fundamentals that determine whether young people trust, stay in, and build their societies. Bringing together young people, policymakers, civil society actors, institutional and EU representatives, researchers, media actors, and innovators from across the region and Europe, the conference explores how new "Cooperation Zones" can strengthen democratic fundamentals, EU values, regional solidarity, peacebuilding, participation, social innovation, and inclusive development.

Rather than organizing discussions around isolated sectors, the conference is designed as an interactive ecosystem of dialogue, experimentation, systems mapping, storytelling, and collective action. Concretely prototyping an adaptive and forward-looking cooperation, linked to the future of Europe, and its promotion priorities in the Western Balkans context, as well as to the EU's enlargement and youth engagement priorities in the region. Through policy labs, live civic demonstrations, participatory mapping exercises, future-oriented sessions, and youth-led exchanges, participants will jointly explore how cooperation can move from symbolic dialogue toward practical, sustainable, and youth-led transformation.

The conference places particular emphasis on:

- democratic fundamentals and civic trust, grounded in the EU values,
- meaningful youth participation, including in the EU accession process,
- regional cooperation and peacebuilding, as pre-conditions of EU enlargement,
- digital and democratic innovation, media literacy and resilience to disinformation,
- inclusion, non-discrimination and gender-responsive participation,
- social innovation and entrepreneurship futures, and socio-economic convergence with the EU,
- and the role of youth in shaping resilient democratic societies in the Western Balkans and Europe, on the path towards EU membership.

24.09.2026 [Thursday]

OPENING NIGHT: STORIES OF COOPERATION ON THE ROAD TO THE EU

19:00 – 19:30 OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE

Topic: *EUROPE STARTS HERE – Youth, EU values and the enlargement of our common future*

The conference opens with short welcome addresses framing the event within the European integration of the region and the EU support to youth participation:

- Welcome address by Mr. Metodija Stojceski, executive director of Youth Alliance - Krusevo and Mr. Niko Choneski, Mayor of Municipality of Krusevo;
- Welcome address by Ms. Elena Grabul, Senior Advisor, Regional Cooperation Council-Liaison Office Brussels
- Address by a representative of the Delegation of the European Union on EU support to youth participation, EU values and the enlargement perspective of the Western Balkans (TBC)

19:30 – 21:00 REGIONAL NEXT-GEN LEADERS AWARD CEREMONY

The opening ceremony celebrates young people, initiatives, movements, and organizations strengthening regional cooperation, democratic youth participation, EU values, solidarity, and peacebuilding across the region.

Designed as both a recognition and inspiration moment, the ceremony is designed as a storytelling and narrative-building moment that highlights collaboration across different Cooperation Zones, and how youth-led initiatives are actively shaping new forms of regional connection, social innovation, and civic engagement in their communities and beyond, in the region and in the wider European space.

The ceremony introduces the conference's central theme:

“What are the democratic and social fundamentals needed for the future of cooperation in the region and for its European integration?”

The evening will feature:

- Youth decision makers (Ministers, Mayors, Members of the Parliaments) from across the Western Balkans and the EU,
- Regional collaboration showcases, including EU-supported youth initiatives,
- Multimedia storytelling on what Europe means to young people in the region

25.09.2026 [Friday]

RESTART

DAY 1 – Rebuilding Democratic Trust and Regional Cooperation on the Path to the EU

10:00 – 12:00 Evidence and policy panel

Topic: *THE PARTICIPATION GAP – Data, Democracy and Reality where young people participate and live, and what EU accession requires.*

The session explores the relationship between missing evidence and data, participation and institutional trust, structured in two interconnected parts. First, a provocation presenting findings from the Youth Participation Index (YPI), highlighting regional and country-specific trends. Then a moderated multi-stakeholder dialogue bringing together representatives of the State Statistical Offices, public institutions, EU representatives, civil society organizations, and media actors to reflect through guided discussion, addressing the findings critically and concretely, with a solution-focused orientation. The critical lens will focus on the lack of relevant, disaggregated and regularly updated data on youth participation, including evidence gaps related to all participation levels, barriers to civic engagement, gender dimensions, trust in institutions and unequal access to decision-making. The findings are read alongside the assessments of democratic participation and civic space contained in the EU's annual enlargement reporting, where reliable data is a pre-condition for credible reform. The session will ask:

“How can democratic systems meaningfully respond to youth realities when the data needed to understand them is incomplete, fragmented or missing, and how can youth evidence inform the EU accession process?”

Speakers:

- Mr. Gjoko Velkovski is the Minister of Social Policy, Demography and Youth of the Republic of North Macedonia
- Ms. Vesna Pantelić, Acting Assistant Director, Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia
- Relevant speakers from the institutions for data and young people from WB6 and Turkey (in the process of invitations)

12:00 – 12:45 Coffee Break

12:45 – 14:00 Co-creation design lab

Topic: *NO MORE EMPTY PANELS – Designing accountability between youth and institutions, from dialogue to commitments*

Participants move from discussion toward collective action through facilitated co-creation processes focused on identifying the top three priority actions for improving youth participation pathways, democratic responsiveness and defining one concrete commitment per stakeholder group. These inputs are then structured into clear outputs, including policy recommendations, civic engagement mechanisms, and cross-sector cooperation actions, each linked where relevant to national reform agendas and EU accession priorities. The process is facilitated through rapid co-creation methods, such as small group work with results captured visually through a participatory digital “Commitment Board”.

14:00 – 15:00 Lunch

15:00 – 17:00 High-level policy dialogue

Topic: *THE FUNDAMENTALS OF COOPERATION – trust, participation and shared responsibility in the region and in the EU accession process*

A high-level policy dialogue exploring the essential foundations needed for meaningful and sustainable regional cooperation among young people, civil society, institutions and communities. Instead of focusing only on projects, tools or individual good practices, the discussion will address the deeper conditions that make cooperation possible: trust, democratic participation, inclusion, solidarity, institutional transparency, access to opportunities and shared responsibility. These are the same fundamentals (rule of law, fundamental rights, democratic institutions and civic space, that stand at the core of the EU accession process) which makes them a shared agenda of the region and of the European Union. Panelists will reflect on how these fundamentals currently function across the region, where they are strong, and where they remain weak, fragmented or absent. The discussion will also examine how participation of young people shape the quality of regional cooperation, and whether existing systems provide enough space for youth voices to influence decisions, policies and community development. The panel will ask:

“What are the key democratic, social and economic fundamentals that must be strengthened for regional cooperation to become more inclusive, trusted and responsive to youth realities, and how do they connect to the EU accession path of the region?”

Speakers:

- Official representative of the European Economic and Social Committee, Western Balkans Follow-up Committee (TBC)
- Official member of the EU–North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee (TBC)
- Ms. Maja Varoshlija, ALDA

17:00 – 17:30 Coffee Break

17:30 – 19:30 Participatory ecosystem mapping session

Topic: *THE COOPERATION ATLAS – Mapping what connects, what fragments and what is still missing on the road to the EU*

Building on the experience zones, participants collectively map the current cooperation ecosystem across the region by identifying strong practices, emerging opportunities, fragmented areas, and missing democratic links. Through a facilitated systems-mapping process, participants place each demonstrated practice, tool, or approach into a shared Cooperation Zone Map, visually organizing them into thematic areas and connecting them to the fundamentals of European integration. The session encourages participants to move from isolated experiences toward a shared strategic understanding of how different cooperation structures interact and where stronger integration, solidarity, and institutional and EU support are needed. Special attention is given to:

“Which democratic and social fundamentals — including those assessed in the EU accession process — are currently weak, fragmented, or absent across regional cooperation systems?”

21:00 MANIFEST PARTY

Culture, Connection and Collective European Futures

An informal evening dedicated to cultural exchange, artistic expression, music, storytelling, and regional connection, celebrating the cultural diversity that is part of Europe’s shared heritage.

26.09.2026 [Saturday]

REROUTE

Day 2 - Reimagining Participation, Mobility and Youth Futures in an Enlarging Europe

10:00 – 12:00 Future Forward Session

Topic: *FUTURES WORTH STAYING FOR – Reimagining work and opportunity in the region through social innovation, entrepreneurship and regional resilience and convergence with the EU*

This future-oriented session is an interactive and outcome-oriented session where young participants showcase their enterprise ideas to an international audience of peers, mentors, and stakeholders. The session combines short team presentations with live feedback, audience engagement, and facilitated networking moments, creating a dynamic space for learning, validation, and collaboration. Through direct interaction with representatives from civil society, business, and public institutions and EU-funded programmes, participants will refine their ideas, explore practical pathways for implementation, and identify potential partnerships and support mechanisms. The session also connects youth entrepreneurship to the wider question of opportunity, brain drain and socio-economic convergence with the European Union — why young people leave, and what would make staying worthwhile. The session places strong emphasis on peer exchange, cross-regional cooperation and inclusive participation.

12:00 – 12:45 Coffee Break

12:45 – 14:00 Interactive Policy Lab

Topic: *FROM STREETS TO SYSTEMS – Turning Youth Experience into Democratic Infrastructure for EU Accession*

This participatory policy laboratory creates space for young people and stakeholders to collaboratively transform lived experiences into concrete proposals for democratic youth participation, peacebuilding, regional cooperation and institutional accountability. Each facilitated working group will identify practical pathways for strengthening cooperation, participation mechanisms, and civic trust, while exploring how democratic values, EU values and institutional responsiveness can become more visible in practice. Resulting in 1 concrete recommendation to integrate youth in peace and security governance per working group. Structure of policy output: identified challenge; Proposed intervention; Responsible actors; cooperation mechanism; Implementation entry point; relevant EU accession or reform-agenda anchor.

14:00 – 15:00 Lunch

15:00 – 17:00 Immersive cooperation zones

Topic: *COOPERATION OS – future prototyping digital, civic and human systems for regional connection and European integration*

Participants move through a series of immersive “Cooperation Zones” that showcase real practices, innovative tools, civic technologies and participatory practices shaping the future of youth cooperation and participation, in the region and in the EU. Using experimentation, dialogue and live demonstrations, each zone will host a 12–15-minute experience demonstrating different infrastructures for civic participation, democratic engagement, and regional connection. Featured cooperation zones: Digital cooperation zone - presenting the Youth DigiZone platform and tools for online collaboration and participation and digital citizenship; a Policy & Civic Participation Zone, demonstrating mechanisms such as youth councils, policy labs, and advocacy processes, including simulations of how youth input reaches institutions and EU accession structures; an EU Values, Inclusion & Social Cohesion Zone, featuring practices from interethnic dialogue and peacebuilding, non-discrimination and fundamental rights, as well as methods used in exchanges and workshops; and a Mobility & European Exchange Zone, highlighting youth exchanges, volunteering opportunities, including Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, and cross-border initiatives that strengthen regional cooperation. Creative & Media Cooperation Zone may be included, focusing on digital campaigns, storytelling, podcasting, and the role of youth narratives in shaping regional dialogue and countering disinformation about the EU and the region, and Emerging futures and innovation zone.

17:00 – 17:30 Coffee Break

17:30 – 19:30 Cross-sector matchmaking and ecosystem session

Topic: *SUPPORT WALLS – from ideas to allies, building regional and European ecosystems of support*

This action-oriented session transforms the outcomes emerging from the Interactive Policy Labs, Cooperation Atlas Mapping, and youth showcase sessions into concrete pathways for collaboration and further development. Through a participatory “Support Walls” format, mentors, institutions, civil society organizations, networks, EU-funded programmes and stakeholders present tangible support opportunities connected to the showcased youth ideas, including mentorship, partnerships, funding pathways, mobility opportunities, and regional cooperation mechanisms.

Designed as an interactive and visually facilitated exchange space, the session enables direct connections between ideas and resources while encouraging long-term collaboration, cross-sector partnerships, and sustained support for youth-led initiatives across the region. A dedicated “European Opportunities” wall makes EU support concrete and accessible, presenting programmes and instruments open to young people and youth organisations in the Western Balkans. Beyond resource matching itself, the session also creates space for collective reflection on what kinds of ecosystems, infrastructures, and support systems are needed to strengthen youth participation, democratic engagement, civic innovation, and regional cooperation across the region, on the path to EU membership.

21:00 CLOSING CEREMONY

Topic: *FROM KRUSEVO TO EUROPE – Youth commitments for democratic fundamentals and EU accession*

The closing ceremony consolidates the results of the conference and hands them over to institutional, regional and European partners:

- Presentation of the consolidated conference outputs: policy recommendations on youth in peace and security governance, the Commitment Board, and the Cooperation Atlas;
- Youth and stakeholder commitments read out and formally handed over to institutional representatives;
- Closing address by a representative of the Delegation of the European Union, reflecting on youth participation in the enlargement process and on EU support to young people in the region;
- Closing words by the host organisation and announcement of follow-up steps, including how the outputs will be channelled towards national institutions, regional partners and EU accession dialogue structures.

27.09.2026 [Sunday]

RECOMMIT

*Day 3 - Seeding and harvesting youth narratives, relationships and collective futures
in the region and in Europe*

10:00 – 12:00 Collective reflection and harvesting session

Topic: *HIGHLIGHT HUNT – What are we taking forward together*

The conference concludes with an energetic, game-based discovery process designed to surface the most meaningful moments, ideas, conversations, and connections emerging throughout the programme. Through a facilitated “Highlight Hunt,” participants move through the space engaging in spontaneous conversations, storytelling exchanges, and thematic discovery activities that invite them to collectively identify the boldest ideas, unexpected encounters, transformative insights, and future cooperation possibilities generated during the conference. Guided by thematic prompts such as the most unexpected moment, the boldest idea, and the most unlikely connection, participants uncover diverse perspectives and hidden highlights across the group. This interactive format not only revitalizes the room with movement and curiosity, but also strengthens networking, reinforces shared experiences, and brings forward the richness of the conference in an authentic and engaging way. Combining participatory harvesting methodologies with playful and reflective interaction, the session creates space for participants to collectively reflect on what must be strengthened, protected, and reimagined in order to support more democratic, inclusive, and cooperative futures across the region and within an enlarging European Union.