

Conference Report

Western Balkans EUKI Networking Conference

As (potential) EU accession candidates to the European Union, the Western Balkan countries Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia aim to adhere to EU climate goals, including the obligations under the Paris Agreement. With the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) and the adopted GAWB Action Plan, the region has agreed to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 and to align its policies with the core elements of the European Green Deal.

But political commitment is not enough – the socially just transition accompanying the energy transition requires rigorous, evidence-based planning, a sound governance framework, dialogue, and cross-border collaboration among all involved stakeholders.

In order to strengthen the dialogue and cooperation between civil society and local and national policy makers in the Western Balkans, the EUKI Academy, in cooperation with the Urban Research Institute, URI, hosted the Western Balkans EUKI Networking Conference on 25-27 September 2023 in Tirana, Albania.

The event allowed the EUKI community, representing a large part of Western Balkan civil society, to connect not only with each other but also with high-level representatives from national governments. Through group sessions, keynotes, panel discussions and more informal networking opportunities, participants were able to exchange ideas, best practices and, most importantly, define in what ways the Western Balkans need to work together to achieve the mitigation goals they have set.

The European Climate Initiative (EUKI) of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK) contributes to the achievement of the goals of the regional climate partnership by funding civil society projects in the Western Balkans. In addition to the EUKI's project funding, the EUKI Academy organizes events such as seminars, trainings and conferences to disseminate knowledge and connect stakeholders from Southeast, Central and Eastern Europe working in the field of climate action.

Unveiling the reality of Western Balkans climate action

The EUKI Academy welcomed over 120 guests from the six Western Balkan countries, Croatia, Greece, Austria and Germany made up of civil society representatives, policymakers and more. Starting off the first day of networking and learning, Zana Vokopola, Director of the Urban Research Institute, and Rezart Kapedani, expert on the EU Acquis for Chapter 27, provided insights into the GAWB's political background, who is involved, and actively discussed with participants how and by whom it can be implemented. In cooperation with governments, civil society can propose policy changes to align with the EU climate strategy. Civil society organization should create linkages between government, industry, civil society and the academic sector, as well as environments in which underrepresented voices are heard.

While many citizens from different Western Balkan countries seemed to share the same struggles on the long road to EU-accession, others could tell stories from inside the bloc. Participants from Croatia (accession 2013) and Austria (accession 1995) shared how particularly the development of climate mitigation laws in their countries benefited from the force of the European Union.

After contemplating future efforts, the EUKI project [Climate Bridges](#) already took the first step towards implementing the GAWB and celebrated the launch of its Climate Bridges Network. The network will hold regular meetings and events, discussing joint climate action of civil society in the six Western Balkan countries as well as Slovenia, Croatia and other neighboring countries.

The official evening reception was opened by Matthias Casper, Councillor of European Climate Policy at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK), Iven Schad, Head of Development Cooperation at the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Tirana, and Hubert Perr, Head of Cooperation at the EU Delegation to Albania. Mr. Casper and Mr. Schad emphasized the importance of EUKI's work and the regional climate partnership, particularly with regard to the Berlin Process, which is also being hosted in Tirana this year. Discussing the strategy agreed upon in the Green Agenda, Mr. Perr stressed: "It's important to recognize the commitments that you have made and hold you accountable to those commitments. [...] The European Union is here to support you in this endeavor!"

Putting the spotlight on the Green Agenda

The main conference day commenced with a group session on the topic of cooperation between civil society and policy level, moderated by Jakob Dietachmair, Director at Austrian NGO CIPRA International Lab. At group tables, the EUKI community and representatives of different governmental bodies came together to exchange anecdotes of their work together. Opening the discussion to the plenum, participants agreed that more frequent exchanges on a level playing field would be beneficial. Here, governmental bodies should engage in a comprehensive, transparent and collaborative manner. Civil society has the responsibility of bringing forth concrete, tangible, evidence-based policy recommendations. However, a range of hurdles add to this issue: A lack of core funding for NGOs makes long-term and independent work difficult. Likewise, irregular personnel changes in politics and administration make continuous and trusting cooperation difficult. In addition, there is a partial lack of departmental cooperation and inadequate coordination between the local and national administrative levels around climate protection, which prevent the close involvement of civil society.

Starting with the official opening by EUKI Deputy Director Ulrike Leis and Dr. Heinz Hetmeier, Deputy Director-General for European Policy at the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, the conference was also broadcasted online to more than 50 additional participants. Dr. Hetmeier stressed the urgency of EU and Western Balkan cohesion and cooperation and the essential contributions of EUKI projects to climate change mitigation. In the following keynote, Adam Cwetsch, Head of the European Green Deal Unit at the Energy Community Secretariat, laid out where the Western Balkans stand in the alignment to the EU electricity market and what civil

society must contribute: “Acting as an advocate for green policies, for difficult decisions to be made, monitor progress, raise awareness, and mobilize communities to take action and responsibilities”.

With this inspiring exposition, moderator Edlir Vokopola, Director of Planning and Development at Urban Research Institute, initiated the two following panel discussions. Assistant Minister Dusan Carkic from Serbia, Ministry for Environmental Protection, State Secretary Nebi Rexhepi from North Macedonia, Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning, Deputy Minister Almira Xhembulla from Albania, Ministry of Tourism and Environment, Deputy Minister Avni Zogiani from Kosovo, Ministry of Environment, Spatial Planning and Infrastructure, as well as Assistant Minister Mirza Hujic from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations, who joined us virtually, emphasized their countries' commitments to the aims of the Green Agenda and laid out the projects and legislations that have already been adopted.

During the second panel, EUKI project implementers Valbona Mazreku, representing the project EUCENA, and Vedad Suljic, representing Balkan Solar Roofs, were joined by Andrea Ferrero, Head of Operation Section II at the EU Delegation to Albania, and Adam Cwetsch from the Energy Community Secretariat. Both sides shared their perspectives on the action already taken by EUKI projects on the one hand and the part to be played by the EU on the other hand. Everyone involved could relate to the frustrations of inefficient climate governance and a lack of responsibility in relevant institutions for the implementation of the GAWB Action Plan. The speakers agreed that inadequate capacities, especially in local administrations, as well as a lack of public awareness often hinder climate action. Capacity building programs, multi-stakeholder engagement and more tailored financial support, all adjusted to the specific needs and gaps of each country, were considered promising solutions.

EUKI Networking Conference – The afterglow

After two days of networking and discussions, the conference was concluded with a look at the practical side of climate action. In a morning field trip to the Gustav Mayer School in Tirana, participants gained insights into two projects on sustainable urban planning and prosumer solar energy. Martin Schäfer, advisor at the German Development Cooperation (GIZ) represented the project Sustainable Urban Transport in Tirana. Together with Ray Koci, Project Manager at Qenda Marrëdhënie, they explained how they had accomplished the reconstruction of the school's surrounding street to establish a safer, more walkable environment for children and a more sustainable traffic situation. Dritan Nelaj, Team Leader at the Open Society Foundation then presented the Sunny Schools Initiative's work installing solar panels on the school's roof to enable energy self-sufficiency.

After three days of networking, discussing, advising and more, the Western Balkans EUKI Networking Conference came to an end. With a number of positive feedbacks, the event accomplished its goal of connecting stakeholders and significantly contributing to the discussion of how the Western Balkans can best move forward in the implementation of the Green Agenda.

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