



98th ROSE-ROTH SEMINAR REPORT

EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS: REINFORCING THE EUROPEAN PEACE PROJECT

SKOPJE, THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*

27-29 June 2018

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This Seminar Report is presented for information only and does not necessarily represent the official view of the Assembly. This report was prepared by Andrius Avizius, Director of the Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security.

INTRODUCTION

1. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly (NATO PA) met in Skopje for its 98th Rose-Roth Seminar from 27 to 29 June 2018, less than two weeks after the historic agreement on the name issue between Prime Ministers Alexis Tsipras and Zoran Zaev.
2. Western lawmakers felt a palpable surge of optimism in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia* after years of despair over the lack of progress towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, the speaker of the parliament, Talat Xhaferi, and other high-ranking government officials noted that the country has made significant breakthroughs in recent years, both domestically – bolstering democratic institutions, judicial and media independence, the rule of law and interethnic cohesion – and internationally – signing milestone agreements with Bulgaria and Greece.
3. During the three-day seminar, local and international experts, diplomats and government officials addressed the ongoing reform processes across all government sectors. The seminar also tackled other important topics for the Western Balkans, including the state of interethnic relations, the role of disinformation and misinformation in public discourse as well as the migration crisis and the Balkan Route.
4. This event was organised with the generous support of the Swiss government and the Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF). The seminar brought together approximately 120 participants in total. The key objective of Rose-Roth Seminars is to facilitate dialogue on regional security matters among legislators from NATO and partner nations.

I. THE SKOPJE-ATHENS DEAL – THE NEW IMPETUS FOR THE NATO AND EU INTEGRATION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

5. Prime Minister **Zoran Zaev** told NATO parliamentarians that his government considered the recent decision of the EU Council – to launch accession talks in June 2019, provided reforms continue – as an important victory for the country. He also expressed hope that Allied leaders decide to start accession negotiations at the NATO Summit in Brussels on 11 and 12 July.
6. **Ilija Dimovski**, Head of the Delegation of the Assembly of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to the NATO PA, representing the parliamentary minority, stressed that there is a wide consensus on Euro-Atlantic integration within the society, and that his country has already contributed to Allied security by actively participating in NATO-led missions.
7. **Talat Xhaferi**, President of the Assembly of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, stressed the importance of the parliamentary dimension of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and highlighted the role of the Rose-Roth seminar programme. He saw a number of positive developments in the Western Balkans in recent years, including the NATO accession of Montenegro, ongoing dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina and Skopje's agreements with Bulgaria and Greece. He was convinced that the name deal with Athens would be swiftly implemented, allowing the country to become the 30th member of NATO in early 2019. He also said that more than 70% of the society supports NATO membership.
8. President of the NATO PA **Paolo Alli** welcomed the landmark agreement signed less than two weeks prior to the seminar, which shows that diligent diplomacy can cut through the thorniest of disputes. The agreement can serve as an inspiration for the Western Balkans and beyond. According to President Alli, in these uncertain times, such inspiration is very welcome. Mr Alli also commended the host country on rebuilding a culture of compromise, which is so fundamental to democracies, as well as on reinforcing its reputation as a serious partner for NATO and the EU. "When I address the

* *Turkey recognises the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.*

Allied leaders at the Summit, I will make the case that you should become NATO's 30th member", Mr Alli said. With regard to the EU, he said he was aware that many in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia wanted an immediate start of the EU accession talks, but the recent decision of the EU Council was still a major achievement for the country.

9. According to the keynote speaker of the seminar, **James W. Pardew**, former US Special Envoy in the Balkans and former NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Operations, history shows that the West neglects the Balkan region at great peril. "The US and Europe, who have invested so much in the region, must remain fully engaged in the Balkans and continue to consolidate local membership in the Alliance", Mr Pardew argued.

10. The keynote speaker joined President Alli in praising the Skopje-Athens agreement. "Not very often are national political leaders given the historic opportunity to change the future direction of their nation and their region. In achieving this agreement, Prime Ministers Zaev and Tsipras showed strong and decisive leadership", Mr Pardew said. He noted that the new name – the Republic of North Macedonia – "has an excellent sound to it, and it represents the reality of this historic and important land".

11. The keynote speaker recalled the history of NATO's involvement in the Balkans. He pointed out that NATO's commitment changed the region. It also changed NATO in very important ways, converting NATO from a Cold War security institution to a modern alliance capable of expanding its partnerships and operating to address common threats outside of central Europe.

12. Mr Pardew stressed that democratic values were at the core of the process that achieved peace in the Balkans. These values – the rule of law, individual liberty, freedom of expression, a free and independent press, and equal rights – should always be a priority component of American and European foreign and national security policy, he said.

13. With regards to Russia, the keynote speaker recalled his experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, where he witnessed first-hand the powerful effects of Russia's positive engagement with the United States and European nations. Unfortunately, Russia chose the path of a confrontational relationship with the West. Mr Pardew noted that the responses to Russian military aggression have been more effective than the response to Putin's international political strategy, which is having some success in the United State and in Europe. He called for strong international leadership in defence of democracy against this new form of Russian political aggression.

14. **Bekim Maksuti**, Deputy Minister of Defence of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, told the participants that his country currently spends 1.1% of its GDP on defence, but that it plans to increase it by 0.2 percentage points each year until the 2% target is reached. He also said that the country plans to invest in the modernisation of its armed forces. Some 7,800 personnel from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia have so far participated in international (including NATO-led) missions, and the country's participation in the *Resolute Support* mission is set to increase further, Mr Maksuti said.

15. **Stevo Pendarovski**, National Coordinator for NATO membership, reminded the participants that his country is a record-holder for standing at NATO's door: it has completed 19 cycles of the Membership Action Plan (MAP). He stressed that the citizens overwhelmingly support NATO membership, largely because of memories of NATO's crucial assistance during and after the crisis of 2001. Currently, the country is facing a different type of security risk, such as cyber and fake news. He recalled that a number of trolls and fake news producers trying to influence the 2016 US elections were in fact operating from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. He was positive that his country's association with NATO is crucial in addressing these new risks.

16. **Danijela Barisic**, Ambassador of Croatia, representing the NATO Contact Point Embassy in Skopje, emphasised the importance of public support for NATO membership. She argued that it takes strong political leadership and constant communication with the people on the part of ruling elites to maintain this level of support.

17. **Ismet Ramadani**, President of the Euro-Atlantic Council, Skopje, expressed his conviction that the name agreement with Greece does not undermine the identity of the people of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. He said that there is no alternative to NATO and EU membership for his country. Membership in both organisations is the path to security, democracy and economic development.

18. The Director for Bilateral Relations at the Foreign Ministry of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, **Goran Stevchevski**, noted that people-to-people contacts between his country and Greece have been excellent for many years. The turning point was the courage of political leaders in Skopje and Athens. He also stressed that, in addition to Greece, his country has been working to improve relations with other neighbours as well. He highlighted the milestone agreement with Bulgaria. As a result of these efforts, Greece and Bulgaria became Skopje's biggest advocates in recent EU meetings. New cooperation initiatives were launched with Albania and Kosovo. Relations with Serbia have traditionally been excellent, the deputy minister said. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia also actively participates in regional initiatives, including hosting a regional summit on the issue of interconnectivity.

19. **Daniela Boudinova**, Deputy Head of the Bulgarian Mission in Skopje, highlighted the need for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to pursue ambitious reforms. However, these reforms alone will not be sufficient, she warned, as one will have to simultaneously tackle external influences that aim to derail the integration process.

20. **Dusanka Divjak-Tomic**, Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia in Skopje, was less upbeat about the situation in the Western Balkans. She noted that attempts to impose one country's interests at the expense of others still persists. In particular, she warned that open calls for "Greater Albania" present a threat to stability in the region. She also said that accusations against the Republic of *Srpska* entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina are unhelpful and reiterated Serbia's commitment to the Dayton agreement. She also reaffirmed Belgrade's non-recognition of the unilateral declaration of independence by the authorities in Pristina. The ambassador concluded by saying that Serbia has no hidden agenda in the region, and that the future of the Western Balkans lies in the full integration into the EU.

21. **Ylber Hysa**, Ambassador of the Republic of Kosovo in Skopje, said that the leaders in Pristina as well as the people of Kosovo see NATO as the pillar of security in the Western Balkans. NATO membership remains a top priority for Kosovo. Pristina is also committed to continuing dialogue with Serbia and to strengthening the multi-ethnic society in Kosovo. Mr Hysa said he hoped the Skopje-Athens name agreement would provide a positive impetus for advancing the normalisation between Pristina and Belgrade. The ambassador also cited a number of important regional practical cooperation initiatives that Kosovo participates in.

22. **Fatos Reka**, Ambassador of the Republic of Albania in Skopje, stressed that NATO's commitment in the Balkans is a success story and that NATO needs to remain involved in order to counter the impact of a third party that seeks to derail the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. He welcomed the Skopje-Athens agreement on the name issue but noted that further progress was needed to create a truly multi-ethnic society in the country.

23. **Dimitris Yannakakis**, Ambassador of Greece in Skopje, said that, following the signing of the name agreement, Greece has already notified the NATO Secretary General that it supports the extension of an accession invitation to Skopje. Mr Yannakakis clarified that the support is conditional to the outcome of the referendum and the adoption of the relevant constitutional amendments by the

former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. According to the ambassador, the Greek government strongly believes that the conditions are now in place to permanently leave behind the difficult period and to develop strong and deep relations between the countries. He noted that the agreement also contains a section on strengthening cooperation in a number of areas, including economy, education, culture, technology, civil protection and defence.

24. Deputy Foreign Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina **Josip Brkic** also stressed that his country has reached the limit in terms of registering defence property – the precondition for the activation of the NATO MAP. He called on the Allies to recognise the progress made and to activate the MAP at the NATO Summit in July. He argued that this would be a strong stimulus for further reforms in the country.

25. **Judy Dempsey**, Nonresident Senior Fellow at Carnegie Europe and Editor in Chief of Strategic Europe, made an important point that the European and Euro-Atlantic organisations the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia wants to join are themselves undergoing significant transformation. Within NATO, the transatlantic link is being challenged by trade disputes. The EU, according to Ms Dempsey, is in a very serious, dangerous crisis. Euroscepticism is rising and member states increasingly have different perspectives on a range of issues, and particularly on how to handle migration. She called on European politicians to “get their house in order” and to find common approaches to the asylum policy, budget and other issues. She also argued that the Western Balkans are the EU’s backyard and that if the Union has global ambitions, it has to demonstrate a capacity to ensure the stability and development of this region.

II. THE REFORM AGENDA

26. Talat Xhaferi, President of the Assembly of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, stressed that NATO is not merely a military organisation and that membership implies the need to adhere to the principles of democracy, human rights, free media and the rule of law.

27. **Renata Deskoska**, Minister of Justice of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, said her country was aware that the newest EU strategy for the Balkans emphasises the rule of law, an independent judiciary and the fight against corruption and organised crime. Unfortunately, she said, in the last few years the country’s record in these areas has been blemished. The new government has adopted a strategy to rectify these shortcomings and regain people’s trust in state institutions as well as to protect citizens’ rights and liberties. The reforms are designed to increase the efficiency and independence of the judiciary and the prosecutor’s office, imposing European standards. The legal basis is being harmonised with the EU *acquis*, taking into account the recommendations from the Venice commission as well as the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO).

28. According to the minister, the government has also launched an uncompromising campaign to tackle corruption: an interagency structure has been formed and tasked with developing the highest transparency standards. The government plans to strengthen the state anticorruption committee, improve the legislative framework and redouble efforts to raise public awareness and intolerance for corruption.

29. Ms Deskoska concluded by emphasising that the era of paternalistic rule in her country is over and that the people of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia deserve a full-fledged functioning democracy. She stressed her government’s determination to implement the reforms, although she admitted that the adoption of some necessary legislation – particularly where a two-thirds majority in the parliament is required – might be a challenge.

30. **Erwan Fouéré**, Associate Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies, said that the progress made in the field of strengthening the rule of law and reforming public administration has been far too slow, and serious and systemic problems remain. He argued that, for years, the EU institutions have lacked consistency and continuity in their approach towards the

region, prioritising stability over the rule of law and the functioning of democratic institutions, with the result that they have in the past turned a blind eye to the increasingly authoritarian behaviour in some countries.

31. On the other hand, the countries themselves often lacked commitment to the reform agenda, with party political interests taking centre stage over political dialogue and the search for consensus building. Public administration has been deeply politicised in many of the countries of the region. Civil society organisations and media who are critical of governing elites are often at the receiving end of intimidation and harassment by those same elites, despite fulfilling the vital role of ensuring government accountability, Mr Fouéré said.

32. The speaker urged the EU, when assessing reforms in the Western Balkan countries, to focus more on the quality of the laws and on how the laws are effectively implemented. The EU should also strengthen its advisory missions and provide more support to civil society actors in the region.

33. Mr Fouéré called on the countries of the Western Balkan region to demonstrate a much more determined approach in building strong and independent institutions free from political interference. This requires on the part of the governing elites and the political parties a far greater effort towards political dialogue and consensus building. There also needs to be greater efforts towards developing an inclusive model of governance, where the involvement of civil society actors at the national and local levels is guaranteed at every stage of policy development and decision making. He praised the record of the new government in Skopje in this respect as an impressive and welcome effort which should inspire other countries to follow suit.

34. **Marija Risteska**, President of the Center for Research and Policy Making, argued that the decision of the EU Council to make accession talks conditioned and not immediate was the optimal one. This is the best way to ensure that reforms will actually be implemented, she said. The country needs time to recover the administrative capacity that has been lost in recent years, when the most competent people chose to leave the public service.

35. According to her, in the past years, the country was backsliding in terms of democracy and the rule of law. Politicians became unaccountable, and democratic procedures were abused. To change this trend, a combination of political leadership and civil society involvement was needed.

36. Ms Risteska said the country was still in free fall when it came to corruption. Over 90% of people were involved in corrupt activities in the last year, she said. This was a result of damaging processes that prevailed in the country for years. She argued that the government, the civil society and the business community should work together to identify the real problems the people are facing.

37. **Lukas Holub**, Head of the Political and Information Section of the Delegation of the EU in Skopje, presented the EU's perspective on the reform process in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. He noted that the country went through a deep political crisis as well as through backsliding as regards the EU integration process in the recent past. Today, however, EU member states have recognised that politics and society in this country are undergoing significant change, with a renewed spirit of hope and openness. Steps are being taken to address state capture, consolidate democracy, and restore the rule of law and trust in institutions. The most notable step was the adoption of a credible new judicial reform strategy, the implementation of which is underway. The climate for media freedom has also improved. Mr Holub noted that the opposition should also receive credit for these important changes. He also stated that more work is ahead for all three branches of governance. Reforms, in particular on the rule of law, need to continue and deepen.

38. **Sybille Suter Tejada**, Ambassador of Switzerland to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, highlighted Switzerland's support to the Macedonian government in strengthening governance and accountability in the **security and intelligence sector** – a process implemented by the Swiss-based DCAF.

39. **Marc Remillard**, Programme Manager for the Southeast Europe Division at DCAF, stressed that the attraction power of Euro-Atlantic integration has been the main driver for reforms in Southeastern Europe after the fall of communism. Security sectors have been transformed across the region, shifting focus from a state-centric approach to a new human security paradigm. He argued that Western Balkan countries have very well-developed systems of democratic oversight – they have laws and institutions that are often more advanced than those in some Western European countries.

40. However, the speaker pointed out that while the formal requirements of democracy and good security sector governance are all in place, transforming these norms and principles into local, effective practices and daily conduct is challenging. Mr Remillard noted that the recent past in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia illustrates the alarming consequences of weak or non-existent practices of regular and effective security sector oversight.

41. The speaker explained in detail how DCAF works with several national parliaments in the region, assisting them in further developing their capacity, human resources, organisation and procedures, and legislative frameworks.

42. **Dragan Lozancic**, Senior Expert, discussed aspects of intelligence sector reform in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration. He stressed that, unlike ministries of defence, intelligence sectors in the Western Balkans have often been off limits to international advisors and that the process of reforming the intelligence sector has therefore been much less transparent. For many years, NATO's involvement with security sectors in the Western Balkans was limited to helping these countries ensure they are capable of protecting the intelligence information they are being shared. Intelligence services were widely seen as having failed to change their mindset and adapt to the new post-communist realities, wielding too much power and lacking adequate oversight. Public perception of security services in the Western Balkans also remains largely negative.

43. However, Mr Lozancic noted that the situation is slowly beginning to change, and that international cooperation involving the region's security services is increasing. Intelligence sector reform is becoming a more prominent subject on the Euro-Atlantic integration agenda, particularly in regard to EU membership. He stressed the need for security services in the Western Balkans to accelerate their transformation, as their role is expected to grow in the context of the evolving security environment and the rise of asymmetric threats. The speaker argued that intelligence sector reform in the Western Balkans should focus both on the capacity building of security services and on their adaptation to the principles of a democratic society.

III. OTHER ISSUES

44. Ilija Dimovski, Head of the Delegation of the Assembly of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to the NATO PA, identified migrant flows as one of the major threats to the security of the region.

45. **Oliver Spasovski**, Minister of Interior of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, recalled that his country was directly impacted by the migration/refugee crisis: from 2015 to 2016, over 800,000 migrants passed its territory. There were instances when over 10,000 people would enter the country in one day. It was an immense challenge for a small country, but it was dealt with successfully, the minister said. He also pointed out that the closure of the borders did not eliminate the problem and illegal crossings still occur. Over 3,000 illegal crossing attempts were recorded in 2017, and more than 3,000 in the first part of 2018. The government established an interagency structure to disrupt the networks of traffickers. The situation at borders is calm now he said. The country is now better prepared for similar crisis situations, thanks to an improved regional information exchange and early warning system and cooperation with partners such as Frontex and Europol.

The country hosts two transit centres, but has no additional possibilities to open new camps. The minister said that his country remains committed to assisting the EU in handling future migrant crises.

46. **Tihomir Nikolovski**, Associate Protection/Legal Officer at the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Representation in Skopje, argued that solidarity is needed now more than ever to help refugees. Currently, 67.5 million people are displaced worldwide due to persecution and violence. There is a need for a comprehensive refugee crisis response framework. The Balkans have become a crossroad for migrants and refugees. More than 90% of those using the Western Balkans route came from refugee-producing countries. Most moved further to Europe. He reminded, however, that most refugees worldwide – some 85% – are hosted by neighbouring countries in the developing world.

47. During the outset of the crisis, UNHCR scaled up its resources to help the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. US, EU, German and other contributions were crucial. During this joint effort, humanitarian (basic food, accommodation centres, counselling services, etc.), capacity-building (reception and registration) and technical support assistance has been provided in this critical situation. Mr Nikolovski argued that EU policies should set an example of how to support refugees and migrants. It is not about the numbers, it is about the people, he said.

48. **Aleksandar Todosiev**, Head of Section for International Cooperation at the Ministry of Interior (Mol) and National Coordinator for the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI), stressed the need to differentiate between refugees, legal migrants and illegal migrants. Illegal migration can lead to situations where human lives are put in danger. The Mol has sought to minimise these risks and protect human lives. For instance, a system for asylum was introduced whereby police could issue the confirmation for migrants/refugees to either apply for asylum or be allowed to move to another country. During the height of the crisis, Mol representatives were constantly in the field. Mr Todosiev emphasised the important support his country received from regional and international partners. This support was particularly necessary when central European countries started closing their borders and the pressure on the borders of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia increased considerably. He particularly highlighted the importance of multilateral frameworks such as MARRI.

49. Another topic on the seminar's agenda was the state of the **media landscape** in the Western Balkans.

50. **Robert Popovski**, Minister without Portfolio in charge of Communications, Accountability and Transparency, said that a worrying spread of disinformation aims to influence public opinion while undermining democratic reforms, the rule of law, and political stability. The effects of fake news are visible daily and this fuels hatred and paranoia, and enhances intolerance. Its success is based on half-truths, clever titles, and "clickbait".

51. Proper media respects truth and ethics, but the perpetrators of fake news abuse freedom of speech to promote violence and aggressive behaviour. It is not realistic to expect normal citizens to do rigorous fact checking, so there should be regulations to control fake news and balance it with proper media, Mr Popovski said.

52. It is also necessary to teach media literacy. According to the speaker, the population has been subjected to 11 years of propaganda. The current government will not engage in propaganda, and it will be careful not to over-regulate because freedom of speech must be protected.

53. In addition to improved education, journalists should have more resources available. Television is of poor quality and moulded by previous governments. The current government wants to change the relationship with television and the media, and accepts the need for reforms to professionalise the sector. A new law has been passed to change management and regulatory board membership.

54. Fake news stepped up when the initial agreement with Greece was signed, and it is expected to increase further when NATO accession talks start, Mr Popovski warned. Fortunately, the public is relatively sophisticated because it has learned to deal with government propaganda. The current government intends to be fully transparent.

55. **Sinisa-Jakov Marusic**, Journalist at Balkan Insight/Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, said that the previous government imposed tight control on the media. There are lots of TV channels, newspapers and internet-based media available, and mainstream media are improving in quality. The first live debate between the prime minister and the opposition in 15 years had recently taken place.

56. Government agencies were trying to improve communications with the media and no longer trying to gag it. Editorial policies were more balanced. Web media showed more bias, some in favour of the government and some in favour of the opposition, the delegation learned.

57. Media ownership structures based on local businesses and political elites needed to be changed. In addition, journalists' salaries remain very low, many journalists are of low quality, and many are not protected by unions.

58. **Nemanja Todorovic Stiplija**, Editor-in-Chief at European Western Balkans, argued that media legislation in Western Balkan countries is up-to-date and aligned with EU standards. However, the lack of implementation of existing rules leads to a media environment not conducive to the full exercise of media freedom. The trend of media freedom erosion is particularly visible in Montenegro and Serbia, as was previously the case in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Those countries are facing poor implementation of existing laws, clientelism, politicisation, corruption, and insufficient political will to promote media pluralism and independence. Over the years, Transparency International warned of direct and indirect pressure on the media in the Western Balkans. The lack of transparency of media ownership and funding sources remains a concern.

59. According to the speaker, external influence in the Western Balkans' information space has been raising in the past several years. In particular, he singled out Russia's involvement. Since 2012, a considerable number of online news outlets that openly promote Russian interests have appeared on the Balkans' media scene, particularly in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These outlets twist facts and stimulate public cynicism, uncertainty, apathy, distrust, and paranoia. They promote a Russian perspective on international affairs and history, while attempting to discredit Western structures.

60. Commenting from the floor, **Vesel Memedi**, a member of the National Democratic Revival, said that Skopje needed partners in NATO and the European Union to help deal with fake news. Noting that Facebook had identified the territory of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia as a source of fake news internationally, Mr Memedi remarked that it was not difficult to imagine what influence those sources could have if brought to bear upon the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia itself. Fortunately, there was evidence of both increasing professionalism of journalists and more investigative reporting. The government was also increasing the declassification of information and wanted to increase public accountability.

61. The participants of the seminar also addressed the complex issue of **interethnic relations** in the Western Balkans.

62. Professor **Veton Latifi**, of the South East European University, noted that interethnic cohabitation in the Balkans is being jeopardised by political manipulations and different perceptions on history. He argued that durable interethnic stability in the region depends on the full consolidation of democracy in the Balkan countries, which can be best achieved through Euro-Atlantic and European integration. In the case of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, he highlighted the

importance of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, but noted that delays in the EU and NATO integration process affected the state of interethnic relations in the country. He also warned that some external players from the east are trying to deepen the interethnic cleavages in the region for the sake of their geopolitical interests. Professor Latifi stressed the need to address the problem of ethnic segregation in schools and to promote what he called an “interethnic chemistry” in the Balkans.

63. **Zvezdana Kovac**, Executive Director of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, argued that despite the current period of peace in the Western Balkans, genuine reconciliation between the Balkan peoples still has not taken place. This “peace” is simply the end of open conflict, rather than the resolution of the problems that caused conflict in the first place. The weight of history, prejudices and mistrust among nations and ethnic groups remain intact. She briefly described the most acute interethnic problems in each of the Western Balkan states.

64. In conclusion, Ms Kovac recommended focusing on education, which should promote self-criticism, dialogue and empathy while freeing people from stereotypes and prejudices. The recent Skopje-Athens agreement demonstrated that solving conflicts is possible with dialogue, compromises and wisdom. This example showed that there is potential in the Balkans, but it also showed how important the role of the international community is.
