



REPORT

Skopje Initiative & 2026 Korčula High-Level Political School

Date: Skopje, 6 June 2026

Participants: Political leaders from the region, policymakers, foundations and civil society representatives from the Western Balkans and Europe (Annex 1 – list of participants)

Purpose: Strategic dialogue on democratic resilience, regional cooperation, and the European future of the Western Balkans; the launch of the Skopje Initiative and the celebration of 15 year anniversary of the Korčula School think tank.

Organised by: SDSM Macedonia and the CEE Network for Gender Issues in cooperation with the Olof Palmes Internationella Center

1. Executive Summary

The joint meeting of the **Skopje Initiative** and the **2026 Korčula High-Level Political School** convened key progressive and social democratic actors to address the deepening democratic, socio-economic, and geopolitical challenges facing the Western Balkans. Participants agreed that the region stands at a decisive historical moment, confronted by authoritarian tendencies, erosion of the rule of law, entrenched corruption, organized crime, and accelerating emigration of young people.

The meeting reaffirmed that **progressive and social democratic parties carry a unique responsibility** to rebuild democratic resilience, restore trust in institutions, and mobilise societies toward a democratic, European, and socially just future. The Skopje Initiative, reinforced by the longstanding work of the Korčula School and the CEE Gender Network, was recognised as a central platform for coordinated regional action.

2. Context and Key Challenges

Participants identified a convergence of destabilising trends:

- Rising authoritarianism and illiberal governance
- Systemic corruption and organized crime
- Weakening of the rule of law and judicial independence

- Slowing socio-economic development
- Intensified emigration and brain drain
- Geopolitical pressures from extra-regional actors
- Declining public trust in institutions and democratic processes

These challenges mirror broader European and global democratic backsliding, underscoring the need for coordinated, value-driven responses.

3. Key Discussion Points

3.1 Fragmentation of Democratic Actors

Participants noted that democratic forces often compete among themselves rather than confronting anti-democratic actors. In contrast, illiberal forces coordinate effectively. Strengthening cooperation among progressive actors was identified as essential. Solidarity, unity of purpose and cooperation among socialdemocratic and progressive forces in the region, coupled with support from their EU counterparts is crucial in the joint fight against authoritarianism, peace, development and progressive values in the region especially.

3.2 Rebuilding Democratic Resilience

Discussions emphasised the need to restore trust in institutions, ensure accountability, and create socio-economic opportunities that encourage young people to remain in the region. Addressing citizens' aspirations and concerns should be a key element in political strategies.

3.3 The Role of Progressive and Social Democratic Parties

These parties were recognised as the only political actors with credibility, values, and networks capable of leading a democratic transformation grounded in:

- Transparent and accountable governance
- Social justice and equality
- Gender equality and inclusive development
- A clear European orientation

3.4 Strategic Platforms for Cooperation

The meeting highlighted that strategic platforms for cooperation are the activities of the **CEE Gender Network**, advancing gender equality as a democratic imperative, the **Korčula School** — 15 years as a regional forum for progressive dialogue and leadership and now a new political hub for regional coordination - the **Skopje Initiative (SDSM, President Dr. Venko Filipche)**.

Together, these platforms in cooperation with socialdemocratic parties in the region, progressive foundations, the PES and PESW, SI and PA, the Western Balkans initiative of the FEPS and the Willy Brandt activity of the EP S&D Group and other actors, form a **progressive ecosystem** capable of confronting authoritarian, nationalist, and populist regimes and propelling the region into EU membership.

4. Agreed Objectives

Participants endorsed the following shared priorities:

- **Strengthen democratic resilience** across institutions and societies
- **Restore the rule of law** and judicial independence
- **Combat organized crime and high-level corruption**
- **Mobilise citizens** around social justice, dignity, and equal opportunities
- **Drive socio-economic transformation** that prevents youth emigration and protects public goods
- **Advance gender equality** and inclusive governance
- **Anchor the region in the European project** through cooperation and solidarity

5. Link to European and Global Progressive Mobilisation

The meeting reaffirmed alignment with the messages of the **Global Progressive Mobilisation in Barcelona (April 2026)**, where global progressive leaders called for unity against authoritarian and far-right forces. It also built on the **2025 High-Level Political Meeting in Tirana** and the **Western Balkans panel in Barcelona**, reinforcing continuity of regional progressive engagement.

6. Conclusions

Participants agreed that the Western Balkans face a generational turning point. The region's democratic future will depend not on the loudest voices, but on those capable of building broad democratic majorities around shared values, accountability, and a common European vision.

Progressive and social democratic parties affirmed their readiness to lead this transformation with integrity, solidarity, and strategic coordination. The integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union was recognised as both a **regional priority** and a **geopolitical necessity for the EU**.

This is not merely a political choice — it is a generational responsibility.

The time to unite, coordinate, and act is now.

Finally, the participants adopted a statement on the situation regarding the Podgorica EU Western Balkan's Summit, namely:

“The participants condemn the destabilizing activities, malign interference and hybrid threats directed at neighbouring countries and democratic processes in the region, including the recent attempt by structures linked to President Vučić's regime to destabilise Montenegro itself and the EU Western Balkan's Summit.

Such actions are incompatible with regional cooperation, democratic values, the rule of law and the principles of the progressive European family. We call on all democratic and progressive actors to stand firmly against any attempt to undermine regional stability, democratic processes and the European future of the Western Balkans.”

#WesternBalkans #Democracy #RegionalCooperation #EuropeanIntegration
#DemocraticResilience #Leadership #CEEGenderNetwork #SkopjeInitiative

7. Proposed Next Steps

- Establish a **joint regional working group** under the Skopje Initiative
- Prepare a **shared policy framework** on democratic resilience and rule of law
- Coordinate **regional communication strategies** to counter disinformation and illiberal narratives
- Strengthen cooperation with European progressive networks
- Integrate Korčula School outputs into regional party platforms
- Develop a **youth-focused socio-economic agenda** to address emigration