

EEN KosInn Newsletter – Issue #3

Special Edition

May 2026

Executive Summary

This special edition of the **Enterprise Europe Network Kosovo Newsletter** is exclusively dedicated to the **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, one of the leading regional platforms for innovation, entrepreneurship, investment, sustainability, and international business cooperation in Southeast Europe. The newsletter presents a comprehensive overview of the festival's activities, achievements, participation statistics, business matchmaking results, and partnership outcomes, highlighting the contribution of the Enterprise Europe Network Kosovo in fostering cross-border collaboration and business growth.

The BALKONNECT Festival 2026, powered by Prishtina REA with strategic support from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the Enterprise Europe Network Kosovo, was successfully held on 21–22 May 2026 at the iconic Piramida of Tirana. Organized in collaboration with 21 international partner organizations from 14 countries, the festival brought together startups, SMEs, investors, policymakers, innovation stakeholders, and business support organizations to explore opportunities for cooperation, investment, and sustainable growth.

Across two intensive days, the festival delivered a high-impact programme featuring 62 speakers, moderators, and contributors through 7 main-stage panels, 14 thematic sessions, and 3 masterclasses. The agenda was complemented by two days of structured B2B matchmaking, SME exhibitions, networking activities, and a startup pitching session organized in cooperation with Keiretsu Forum Southeast Europe.

The festival attracted 281 onsite participants and 299 online participants, while approximately 186 SMEs participated onsite and 251 SMEs engaged online. A total of 381 B2B matchmaking meetings were conducted both onsite and virtually, resulting in six reported partnership agreements and the signing of Memoranda of Understanding involving three startups.

Through these achievements, BALKONNECT Festival 2026 further strengthened its role as a strategic regional hub for innovation, entrepreneurship, investment, and internationalization, while demonstrating the impact of Enterprise Europe Network Kosovo in connecting businesses, fostering partnerships, and supporting the growth of the regional innovation ecosystem.

Agenda

FESTIVAL

21–22 May 2026 Piramida, Tirana, Albania



DAY 1

🕒 TIME	👥 SESSION	📍 LOCATION
10:00 – 11:15	Opening of BALKONNECT Festival 2026	📺 Mainstage
10:00 – 16:30	B2B Matchmaking Sessions	📦 B2B Cube
11:30 – 12:30	Tourism Investment in Albania & the Western Balkans (2026–2030)	📺 Mainstage
13:30 – 15:15	Thematic Sessions	📦 Thematic Cubes
15:00 – 16:15	World Business Angels Forum: Western Balkans Meetup	📺 Mainstage
16:30 – 18:00	Investors' Masterclass	📦 Thematic Cubes
18:30 – 20:30	Networking Cocktail	🍷 Top of Piramida

DAY 2

🕒 TIME	👥 SESSION	📍 LOCATION
10:00 – 18:30	B2B Matchmaking Sessions	📦 B2B Cube
10:00 – 11:00	Renewables & Green Growth Reality in the Western Balkans	📺 Mainstage
11:15 – 12:00	Green Buildings & Energy Efficiency and Circular Economy for SMEs	📦 Thematic Cubes
13:00 – 14:00	Urban & Tourism Infrastructure Projects and Energy, Mobility & Circular Infrastructure	📦 Thematic Cubes
14:00 – 15:00	Trust in Digital Finance & the Digital Economy	📺 Mainstage
15:00 – 16:00	Fintech & Open Banking in SEE	📦 Thematic Cubes
15:00 – 16:00	SaaS & Digital Export from the Western Balkans	📦 Thematic Cubes
16:00 – 18:30	Masterclasses	📦 Thematic Cubes
17:00 – 18:30	Startup & SME Pitching	📺 Mainstage
19:00 – 20:00	BALKONNECT Festival Awards	📺 Mainstage

International Co-Organising Partners

BALKONNECT Festival 2026 was successfully implemented with the support of an extensive and highly committed network of international co-organising partners representing diverse innovation, business, entrepreneurship, and economic development ecosystems across Europe and beyond. These organisations played a vital role in strengthening the international dimension of the festival by promoting the event within their respective networks, disseminating participation opportunities among businesses and stakeholders, mobilising entrepreneurs and innovators, facilitating B2B matchmaking activities, and fostering meaningful cross-border collaboration.

The active involvement of these partners significantly enhanced the visibility and outreach of BALKONNECT Festival 2026, enabling the event to attract a diverse audience of companies, startups, investors, clusters, chambers of commerce, research institutions, innovation agencies, and development organisations from multiple countries. Their contribution helped create valuable networking opportunities, support international business partnerships, encourage knowledge exchange, and strengthen cooperation between entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystems.



The international co-organising partners included:

- Handwerk International Baden-Württemberg (Germany)
- Chamber of Crafts Region Stuttgart (Germany)
- KOSGEB - Small and Medium Enterprises Development Organization (Türkiye)
- Magurele Science Park (Romania)
- Miro Foundation (Bulgaria)
- Kharkiv IT Cluster (Ukraine)
- Agency for Entrepreneurship Development (North Macedonia)
- ANI - Agência Nacional de Inovação (Portugal)
- Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce (Türkiye)
- Sploro (Spain)
- National Documentation Centre - EKT (Greece)
- DAIB - Eastern Anatolian Exporters Association (Türkiye)
- IMM Romania (Romania)

- Konya Chamber of Industry (Türkiye)
- Eurochile Foundation (Chile)
- Istanbul Chamber of Industry (Türkiye)
- HEPA - Hungarian Export Promotion Agency (Hungary)
- Bretagne Compétitivité (France)
- Afaceri.ro (Romania)
- RARR - Rzeszów Regional Development Agency (Poland)
- CzechInvest (Czech Republic)

Through their active engagement and collaborative efforts, these organisations contributed substantially to the success of the festival by expanding its international reach and strengthening connections between business communities, innovation ecosystems, and institutional stakeholders. Their support facilitated the participation of entrepreneurs, SMEs, investors, business support organisations, clusters, chambers of commerce, research centres, universities, and public institutions, creating a dynamic environment for networking, partnership building, and knowledge exchange.

By bringing together stakeholders from different sectors and countries, BALKONNECT Festival 2026 served as a platform for fostering entrepreneurship, accelerating innovation, encouraging investment opportunities, promoting sustainable business practices, and strengthening regional and international economic cooperation. The contribution of the international co-organising partners was instrumental in advancing the festival's mission of creating lasting cross-border partnerships and supporting the development of a more connected, resilient, and competitive entrepreneurial ecosystem across Europe and neighbouring regions.

Speakers, Moderators and Contributors Overview

BALKONNECT Festival 2026 featured **62 speakers, moderators, and contributors from 14 countries**, reflecting the festival's strong international character and its role as a regional platform for innovation, entrepreneurship, investment, sustainability, and business cooperation.

The largest representation came from **Albania** and **Kosovo** while international experts participated from Slovenia, Croatia, Greece, Türkiye, Portugal, Germany, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Belgium, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Philippines, highlighting the festival's strong international outreach and commitment to fostering cross-border cooperation and knowledge exchange.

The speakers represented a broad spectrum of sectors, including European institutions, international financial organizations, investment networks, banking and finance, tourism and hospitality, renewable energy, sustainability and ESG, infrastructure, digital transformation, fintech, cybersecurity, education, technology, startup ecosystems, and business support organizations.

This diverse international representation ensured a high-quality programme, facilitated the exchange of knowledge and best practices, and strengthened opportunities for regional and international collaboration. The participation of experts from both the Western Balkans and international markets significantly contributed to the achievement of the festival's objectives and reinforced BALKONNECT Festival 2026 as a leading platform for dialogue, innovation, investment, and cross-border partnership development.

Participant Overview

BALKONNECT Festival 2026 brought together a diverse community of entrepreneurs, SMEs, startups, investors, financial institutions, business support organisations, public institutions, academia, and international development stakeholders. The festival served as a dynamic platform for networking, knowledge exchange, business matchmaking, and cross-border cooperation.

The first day of BALKONNECT Festival 2026 attracted a diverse and highly engaged audience, bringing together entrepreneurs, business leaders, investors, financial institutions, tourism professionals, academics, public sector representatives, and innovation ecosystem

stakeholders from across the Western Balkans and Europe.

STAKEHOLDER CATEGORY	NUMBER	% OF TOTAL PARTICIPANTS
 SMEs / Private Companies	91	60.3%
 Banks & Financial Institutions	7	4.6%
 Government Agencies & Public Institutions	8	5.3%
 Chambers of Commerce & Business Support Organisations	8	5.3%
 Universities / Academia	6	4.0%
 Investors & Investment Networks	3	2.0%
 Tourism Organisations & Clusters	7	4.6%
 International Organisations / Development Agencies / EU Institutions	11	7.3%
 Other / Unspecified Participants	10	6.6%
 TOTAL	151	100%

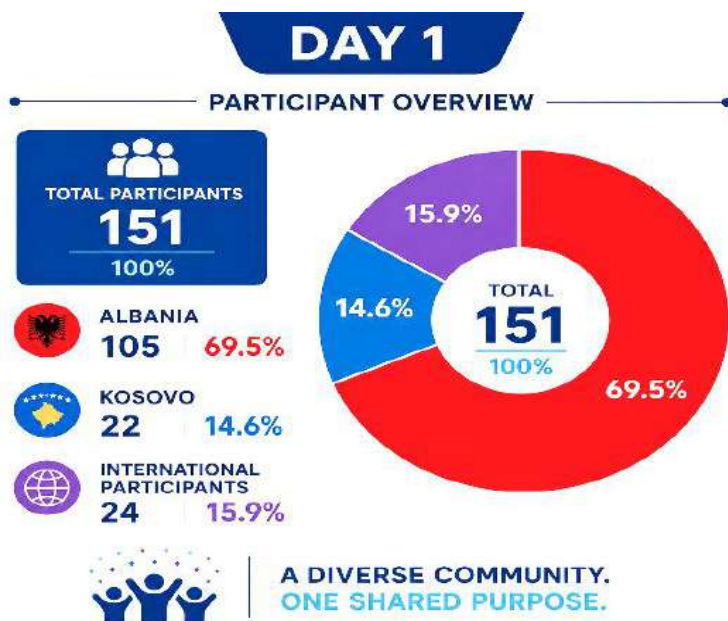
A total of **151 participants** took part in the day's activities, including keynote sessions, panel discussions, networking events, and business matchmaking meetings. The participant profile reflected the festival's multidisciplinary approach, creating opportunities for knowledge exchange, partnership development, and cross-sector collaboration.

The participant base demonstrated strong engagement from the private sector, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), technology companies, tourism operators, consulting firms, and innovation-driven businesses. Representatives from the banking and financial sector, including commercial banks and investment organisations, actively contributed to discussions on access to finance, investment readiness, and business growth opportunities.

Academic institutions and universities were also well represented, highlighting the importance of research, skills development, and knowledge transfer within the innovation ecosystem. Participation from chambers of commerce, development agencies, business support organisations, and international cooperation projects further enriched the programme by facilitating institutional dialogue and international partnership building.

A notable feature of Day 1 was the strong representation of the tourism and hospitality sector, including tour operators, destination management organisations, hospitality businesses, tourism experts, and sustainable tourism practitioners. Their participation complemented discussions on innovation, entrepreneurship, digitalisation, and sustainable economic development.

The combination of local, regional, and international participants created a dynamic environment for networking and collaboration, contributing significantly to the achievement of the festival's objectives. The diversity of sectors, organisations, and countries represented on the first day demonstrated the growing relevance of BALKONNECT Festival as a platform for innovation, investment, business cooperation, and sustainable development in the Western Balkans and beyond.



Day 1 of BALKONNECT Festival 2026 attracted **151 participants from 14 countries**, demonstrating the event's strong regional and international outreach. Albania accounted for the largest share of participants with **105 representatives (69.5%)**, followed by Kosovo with **22 participants (14.6%)**. International participation represented **15.9% of total attendance**.

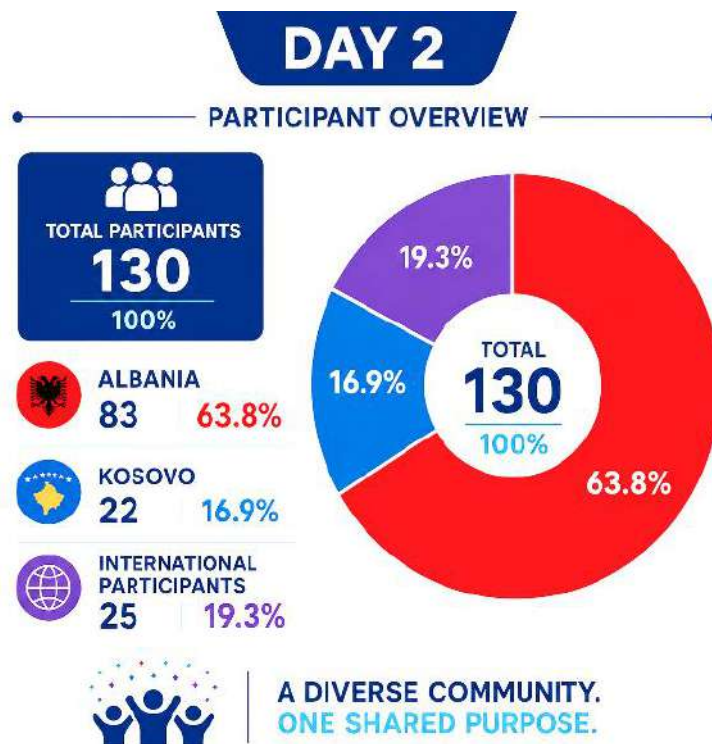
The diverse geographical representation reinforced the festival's role as a platform for cross-border collaboration, international networking, knowledge exchange, and partnership development between the Western Balkans and wider European and global innovation ecosystems.

Day 2 of BALKONNECT Festival 2026 gathered **130 participants**, including entrepreneurs, SMEs, financial institutions, investors, government representatives, international organisations, chambers of commerce, innovation actors, and technology companies. The programme focused on green transition, digitalisation, fintech, innovation, entrepreneurship, investment readiness, and sustainable business development.

The private sector represented the dominant stakeholder group, with **approximately 95 SMEs and startup companies**, accounting for **73.1%** of total participants.

CATEGORY	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
 SMEs & Private Companies	95	73.1%
 Banks & Financial Institutions	8	6.2%
 Government Agencies / Public Institutions	1	0.8%
 Chambers of Commerce	3	2.3%
 International Organisations	2	1.5%
 Investors	7	5.4%
 Speakers & Experts	32	Included in attendance
 Other / Unspecified	14	10.7%
 TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	130	100%

Participants and speakers represented **11 countries**, reflecting the international nature of the festival.



Balkonnect Festival 2026 Gala Dinner - Welcoming Evening at Stella Resort



The official pre-opening of BALKONNECT Festival 2026 commenced with an exclusive welcoming gala dinner held on **20 May 2026 at Stella Resort in Tirana**, bringing together approximately **50 distinguished participants**, including keynote speakers, moderators, festival organizers, representatives of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), institutional stakeholders, international partners, business leaders, investors, ecosystem builders, and invited guests from across the Western Balkans and Europe.

As the first official gathering of the festival, the gala dinner served as an important milestone in launching the BALKONNECT Festival experience and setting the tone for the two days of intensive discussions, investment dialogues, masterclasses, networking activities, and partnership-building opportunities that followed. More than a ceremonial opening, the evening was carefully designed to create an environment where meaningful professional relationships could begin before the formal programme commenced, allowing participants to engage in open dialogue, exchange perspectives, and establish connections that would continue throughout the festival.

Held in the welcoming and elegant setting of Stella Resort, the event reflected the core values of BALKONNECT Festival: openness, collaboration, trust, innovation, and international cooperation. The venue provided an ideal atmosphere for interaction among participants from diverse sectors and

countries, creating a space where institutional representatives, entrepreneurs, investors, development practitioners, and business leaders could meet in a relaxed yet purposeful environment.

The gala dinner was attended by representatives from a broad range of industries and sectors, including banking and finance, investment and venture capital, tourism and hospitality, renewable energy, infrastructure, technology and digital innovation, sustainability, education, international development, trade promotion, and business support organizations. This diversity of participants created a unique opportunity for cross-sector dialogue and fostered conversations that extended beyond individual industries, encouraging a broader exchange of ideas and experiences.

One of the most significant moments of the evening was the welcoming address delivered by **Ahmet Jetullahu, Executive Director of Prishtina REA**, the organization behind the BALKONNECT Festival initiative. In his opening remarks, he warmly welcomed participants to Tirana and expressed appreciation for the strong international presence that had gathered to contribute to the festival. He highlighted the growing importance of regional cooperation and emphasized the need for stronger connections between businesses, institutions, investors, and innovation ecosystems throughout the Western Balkans and Europe.

During his speech, Mr. Jetullahu presented the broader vision behind BALKONNECT Festival, describing it as much more than a traditional business event. He positioned BALKONNECT as a strategic regional platform dedicated to facilitating cooperation, accelerating innovation, promoting investment opportunities, and strengthening economic integration across borders. He stressed that meaningful development in the region requires partnerships built on trust, shared knowledge, and long-term collaboration, and noted that the festival was created precisely to provide such opportunities.

The welcoming address also introduced the festival's overarching theme, "**Business Without Borders,**" which would guide discussions throughout the event. Participants were encouraged to view the festival not simply as a conference but as a collaborative platform where new ideas, partnerships, and projects could emerge through direct interaction among stakeholders from different countries, sectors, and professional backgrounds.

Throughout the evening, participants engaged in lively and constructive conversations that reflected a common interest in strengthening regional competitiveness, attracting investment, promoting innovation, and fostering sustainable economic growth. The informal nature of the gathering allowed discussions to develop organically, creating opportunities for participants to move beyond formal introductions and engage in substantive exchanges regarding business opportunities, investment priorities, technological innovation, sustainability challenges, market expansion strategies, and future collaboration prospects.

Representatives of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) played an active role in these exchanges, interacting with entrepreneurs, startup founders, business support organizations, institutional leaders, and private sector representatives. Their participation reinforced the festival's objective of connecting innovative ideas with sources of capital, expertise, and strategic support. Conversations frequently focused on topics such as access to finance, investment readiness,

entrepreneurship development, digital transformation, green transition initiatives, and mechanisms for supporting business growth throughout the region.

The presence of international speakers and guests further enriched the evening by bringing diverse perspectives from different countries and economic environments. Participants exchanged experiences related to innovation ecosystems, startup support mechanisms, investment promotion strategies, regional development models, and international market trends. These early interactions laid the groundwork for many of the discussions that would later take place during panel sessions, workshops, and thematic forums over the course of the festival.

With approximately 50 participants in attendance, the gala dinner maintained an intimate and high-quality networking atmosphere. The carefully selected guest list enabled meaningful interaction among attendees and allowed participants sufficient time to establish personal connections and explore potential areas of cooperation. Unlike larger networking receptions where interactions can remain superficial, the evening encouraged in-depth conversations that often evolved into discussions about concrete projects, business partnerships, investment opportunities, and institutional collaboration.

Beyond its professional objectives, the event also served as an important platform for cultural exchange. International guests were welcomed with the warmth and hospitality for which Albania is widely recognized, providing many participants with an opportunity to experience local culture while building professional relationships. The combination of hospitality, networking, and strategic dialogue contributed to a positive and engaging atmosphere that helped strengthen trust among participants from different countries and sectors.

The gala dinner highlighted the importance of personal interaction in building successful partnerships. While conferences and formal sessions provide valuable knowledge and insights, it is often through informal conversations that lasting collaborations begin. The event therefore played a crucial role in establishing the sense of community and shared purpose that would characterize the entire BALKONNECT Festival 2026 experience.

As the evening progressed, participants increasingly recognized the value of being part of a regional platform that brings together diverse stakeholders around common goals. Discussions reflected a shared commitment to promoting entrepreneurship, encouraging innovation, attracting investment, supporting sustainable development, and creating stronger economic linkages throughout the Western Balkans and beyond. The event successfully demonstrated that regional challenges can be addressed more effectively when institutions, businesses, investors, and development actors work together across borders.

The pre-opening gala dinner ultimately served as a strategic foundation for the festival's formal programme on 21-22 May 2026. It established early connections between participants, created a climate of trust and cooperation, facilitated initial exchanges of ideas, and helped identify common interests among stakeholders who would continue engaging throughout the event. Many of the relationships initiated during the evening later evolved into discussions during panel sessions, bilateral meetings, networking activities, and business matchmaking opportunities.

As the first official gathering under the “**Business Without Borders**” vision, the gala dinner successfully embodied the essence of BALKONNECT Festival 2026. It demonstrated the festival’s commitment to bringing together people, institutions, businesses, and investors who are actively shaping the future of regional cooperation and economic development. By fostering dialogue, encouraging collaboration, and building bridges between local and international stakeholders, the evening provided a powerful and symbolic start to what would become one of the most internationally connected and collaborative editions of the festival to date.

The success of the pre-opening event confirmed the importance of creating spaces where relationships can develop naturally, trust can be established, and new opportunities can emerge. In this regard, the gala dinner was not merely an introductory gathering but an integral part of the festival’s broader mission to strengthen regional connectivity, support cross-border partnerships, and contribute to a more innovative, competitive, and interconnected economic future for the Western Balkans and its international partners.

Balkonnnect Festival 2026 - Opening Ceremony



The Opening Ceremony of BALKONNECT Festival 2026, held at the iconic Piramida in Tirana on 21 May 2026, marked the official commencement of two days dedicated to entrepreneurship, investment, innovation, sustainability, and regional economic cooperation. Bringing together policymakers, business leaders, investors, development organizations, entrepreneurs, startup founders, chambers of commerce, innovation agencies, financial institutions, and international experts, the ceremony established the strategic direction of the festival and set the foundation for a programme focused on fostering meaningful partnerships and accelerating economic collaboration across borders.

As participants gathered in one of Tirana's most symbolic and forward-looking venues, the atmosphere reflected both optimism and ambition. The Piramida, itself a powerful symbol of transformation and reinvention, provided a fitting backdrop for an event dedicated to shaping the future of regional economic development. From the moment the ceremony began, it was evident that BALKONNECT Festival was intended to be more than a conventional conference. Rather than simply offering a platform for discussion, the festival sought to create an environment where ideas could evolve into partnerships, where strategic conversations could generate investment opportunities, and where regional cooperation could be translated into practical and measurable outcomes.

The opening session welcomed participants from across the Western Balkans and numerous European countries, highlighting the growing international profile of the festival and its ability to convene stakeholders from different sectors and ecosystems. The presence of representatives from

governments, development institutions, international financial organizations, private sector companies, startup communities, academia, and civil society reflected the festival's multidisciplinary approach and its commitment to addressing economic development through collaboration among diverse actors.

The ceremony featured keynote contributions from representatives of Prishtina REA, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in Albania, and the Delegation of the European Union to Albania. While each speaker approached the discussion from a different institutional perspective, their messages converged around a common vision: the future of the Western Balkans depends on stronger regional integration, increased competitiveness, sustainable economic growth, and deeper connections with European and global markets.

Throughout the opening remarks, a recurring theme emerged—the recognition that the Western Balkans is increasingly being viewed not as a collection of fragmented national markets but as an interconnected economic space with significant potential for innovation, investment, and sustainable development. Speakers emphasized that the region's future competitiveness will depend not only on domestic reforms and investment but also on its ability to strengthen cross-border cooperation, improve regional connectivity, and create an environment that supports entrepreneurship and private sector growth.

One of the defining moments of the ceremony was the contribution of **Ritva Heikkinen**, representing the Delegation of the European Union to Albania. Her participation underscored the European Union's long-standing commitment to supporting economic development, institutional strengthening, innovation, and regional cooperation throughout the Western Balkans. In her remarks, she highlighted the importance of collaboration between governments, businesses, and development institutions in creating the conditions necessary for sustainable economic progress.

Her message emphasized that regional integration is not solely a political objective but also an economic imperative. Stronger cooperation among countries, institutions, and businesses can help unlock new opportunities for growth, improve market access, encourage innovation, and increase resilience in the face of global economic challenges. She stressed that alignment with European standards and frameworks provides important opportunities for businesses and institutions across the region to strengthen competitiveness and participate more actively in European value chains and innovation networks.

Particular emphasis was placed on the role of entrepreneurship and innovation as key drivers of economic transformation. By supporting startups, SMEs, research institutions, and innovation ecosystems, the region can create new sources of growth while generating employment opportunities and fostering greater economic diversification. Her remarks reinforced the idea that sustainable development requires collaborative frameworks that enable businesses, institutions, and citizens to benefit from closer economic ties with Europe and from participation in broader international markets.

Equally significant was the contribution of **Katerina Solovova, Head of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in Albania**, whose intervention focused on the relationship between strategic vision and investment implementation. Drawing upon the EBRD's

extensive experience supporting economic development across the region, she highlighted the critical importance of transforming ambitious ideas and development strategies into practical, investment-ready projects capable of attracting financing and generating measurable impact.

Her remarks provided valuable insight into the role of development finance in accelerating economic growth and strengthening private sector competitiveness. She emphasized that sustainable development requires not only innovative ideas but also access to capital, strong institutions, and effective partnerships capable of translating vision into reality. The EBRD's extensive engagement in Albania and throughout the region demonstrates the importance of long-term investment approaches that support infrastructure modernization, energy transition, private sector development, digital transformation, and sustainable economic growth.

Particularly noteworthy was her reference to the more than **EUR 2.5 billion invested by the EBRD in Albania**, illustrating the depth and scale of the institution's commitment to supporting the country's economic development. These investments have contributed to major projects across infrastructure, renewable energy, transportation, municipal services, and private sector development, helping create the conditions necessary for long-term competitiveness and economic resilience.

Her intervention also highlighted the importance of creating investment ecosystems where businesses, governments, and financial institutions can work together to identify opportunities, reduce barriers, and facilitate growth. In this context, forums such as BALKONNECT Festival play a valuable role by bringing stakeholders together, encouraging dialogue, and helping connect investment opportunities with potential partners and financiers.

From the perspective of entrepreneurship ecosystem development, **Ahmet Jetullahu, Executive Director of Prishtina REA**, provided a strategic overview of the vision and objectives behind BALKONNECT Festival. His remarks positioned the event as an evolving regional platform dedicated to fostering cooperation among entrepreneurs, SMEs, investors, development organizations, innovation agencies, and public institutions.

He emphasized that the challenges facing the Western Balkans increasingly require collaborative solutions that transcend national boundaries. Entrepreneurship, innovation, sustainability, and economic competitiveness are not issues that can be addressed in isolation; they require networks of cooperation that bring together expertise, resources, and opportunities from across the region and beyond. BALKONNECT Festival, he noted, was established precisely to facilitate these connections and create an environment where meaningful collaboration can emerge.

Mr. Jetullahu highlighted the importance of supporting entrepreneurship ecosystems that empower startups and SMEs to grow, innovate, and access international markets. He stressed that regional economic development depends heavily on the success of small and medium-sized enterprises, which represent a critical source of employment, innovation, and economic dynamism throughout the Western Balkans. Through networking opportunities, knowledge exchange, investment dialogues, and international partnerships, BALKONNECT seeks to strengthen the ecosystem supporting these businesses and contribute to their long-term growth.

A central element of his address was the festival's guiding concept of "**Business Without Borders.**" This vision reflects the belief that economic development can be accelerated when businesses, institutions, and investors collaborate across geographic and sectoral boundaries. The concept serves as both a strategic objective and a practical framework for the festival's activities, encouraging participants to explore opportunities beyond their traditional markets and establish partnerships capable of generating mutual value.

As the opening ceremony progressed, the collective message delivered by all speakers became increasingly clear. The Western Balkans is entering a new phase characterized by greater openness, stronger connectivity, increasing international engagement, and a growing commitment to economic convergence with Europe. While challenges remain, the region possesses significant assets, including entrepreneurial talent, emerging innovation ecosystems, strategic geographic positioning, and increasing investor interest.

The gathering of multiple stakeholders within a single forum illustrated the growing recognition that sustainable economic development requires cooperation among public institutions, financial organizations, private sector actors, academia, and civil society. The traditional boundaries between these sectors are becoming increasingly interconnected, and successful development strategies depend on the ability to create partnerships that leverage complementary strengths and resources.

The opening ceremony also underscored the importance of trust as a foundation for economic cooperation. Throughout the discussions, speakers highlighted that investment decisions, business partnerships, innovation projects, and development initiatives all rely upon relationships built through dialogue, transparency, and shared objectives. By bringing together stakeholders who may not otherwise interact regularly, BALKONNECT Festival helps create the conditions necessary for these relationships to emerge and flourish.

For many participants, the ceremony represented more than the start of a conference programme. It signaled the beginning of a collaborative process aimed at identifying opportunities, building partnerships, and exploring solutions to common challenges. The conversations initiated during the opening session would continue throughout the festival's panel discussions, masterclasses, B2B meetings, investment forums, networking sessions, and thematic workshops.

By the conclusion of the Opening Ceremony, the strategic direction of BALKONNECT Festival 2026 had been clearly established. The event was presented not merely as a venue for exchanging ideas but as an active platform for facilitating investment, encouraging innovation, supporting entrepreneurship, and strengthening regional cooperation. The emphasis was consistently placed on transforming discussions into action, networks into partnerships, and ambitions into measurable outcomes.

Ultimately, the Opening Ceremony conveyed a powerful and optimistic message about the future of the Western Balkans. It highlighted a region that is increasingly positioning itself as a space of opportunity, innovation, and cooperation—a region capable of attracting investment, generating entrepreneurial success, and contributing meaningfully to broader European economic development. Through collaboration, openness, and shared ambition, the concept of "**Business Without Borders**" is evolving from a vision into a practical reality.

The ceremony therefore served not only as the formal opening of BALKONNECT Festival 2026 but also as a symbolic affirmation of the region’s commitment to partnership, competitiveness, and sustainable growth. It established the foundation for two days of intensive dialogue and collaboration while reinforcing the festival’s role as one of the leading regional platforms dedicated to strengthening connections between business, innovation, investment, and development across the Western Balkans and beyond.

Tourism, Real Estate & Infrastructure and Cultural Heritage & Creative Economy as Tourism Infrastructure



One of the most insightful discussions of BALKONNECT Festival 2026 took place during the session titled **“Tourism, Real Estate & Infrastructure and Cultural Heritage and Creative Economy as Tourism Infrastructure,”** held on 21 May 2026 at the Piramida in Tirana. The session brought together experts from tourism innovation, destination management, investment, entrepreneurship, cultural heritage, and creative industries to explore how modern destinations can create sustainable competitive advantages by integrating tourism development with culture, creativity, infrastructure, and strategic investment.

The session addressed one of the most important transformations currently taking place within the global tourism industry: the shift from tourism as a sector focused primarily on accommodation and attractions toward tourism as a comprehensive ecosystem built around experiences, identity,

innovation, and long-term value creation. Throughout the discussion, speakers highlighted that the destinations achieving the greatest success today are those capable of combining physical infrastructure with cultural authenticity, technological innovation, community engagement, and strategic planning.

Moderated by **Prof. PhD. Kejda Nuhu, Director of the Bridge Center at Marin Barleti University**, the panel provided participants with a multidimensional perspective on how tourism, real estate development, cultural heritage, creative industries, and innovation ecosystems can work together to strengthen regional competitiveness and attract international attention.

The panel featured:

- **Dr. Urška Starc**, Chief Innovation Officer, Arctur
- **Anisa Hykaj**, Executive Director, Institute of Education, Heritage and Tourism
- **Ravik Mima**, Lecturer, Western Balkans University and CEO, Keiretsu Forum SEE
- **Drin Mulliqi**, Founder & CEO, RedMill
- **Fisnik Dragusha**, Founder & CEO, Prime Travel

From the outset, the discussion challenged traditional perceptions of tourism infrastructure. Speakers emphasized that while roads, airports, hotels, and transportation systems remain important foundations for tourism growth, they are no longer sufficient to differentiate destinations in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. Today's travelers seek authentic experiences, cultural immersion, unique stories, and meaningful connections with places and communities. As a result, destinations must think beyond physical infrastructure and invest equally in cultural, creative, and experiential assets.

A central lesson for participants was that **tourism competitiveness increasingly depends on the ability of destinations to create distinctive identities rather than simply expanding visitor capacity**. Panelists demonstrated how successful destinations across Europe and beyond have leveraged their cultural heritage, local traditions, historical narratives, and creative sectors to build strong destination brands capable of attracting visitors, investors, talent, and international recognition.

The discussion explored how cultural heritage should no longer be viewed merely as something to preserve but also as a strategic asset capable of generating economic value when managed responsibly. Historical sites, traditional architecture, museums, local customs, gastronomy, crafts, folklore, and cultural storytelling were presented as powerful components of modern tourism ecosystems. When integrated effectively into tourism strategies, these assets can create unique visitor experiences that cannot be replicated elsewhere.

Participants learned that cultural heritage contributes not only to tourism attractiveness but also to community development and local identity preservation. Panelists emphasized that tourism strategies which involve local communities in preserving and promoting cultural assets tend to generate stronger social and economic benefits while ensuring long-term sustainability.

Another major theme of the session was the growing relationship between tourism and real estate development. Speakers highlighted that tourism and property investment are becoming increasingly

interconnected, particularly in emerging destinations seeking to attract international visitors and investors. Modern hospitality infrastructure, mixed-use developments, destination resorts, business hubs, and urban regeneration projects are all influencing how destinations position themselves in the global tourism market.

The panel provided valuable insights into how strategic real estate investments can contribute to broader destination development objectives. Rather than focusing solely on short-term construction activity, successful projects are those that enhance destination attractiveness, improve visitor experiences, support local businesses, and create long-term economic value. Participants were encouraged to view tourism infrastructure investments as part of larger ecosystem-building processes that connect economic, cultural, environmental, and social objectives.

A particularly important lesson for entrepreneurs, investors, and policymakers was the need for integrated planning. Speakers stressed that tourism growth cannot be managed effectively through isolated projects. Instead, destinations require coordinated strategies that align infrastructure development, urban planning, cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and investment promotion. Such integrated approaches help prevent overdevelopment, preserve local identity, and create more resilient tourism economies.

The role of destination branding emerged as another significant topic of discussion. Panelists noted that destinations increasingly compete for attention in a crowded global marketplace where travelers are influenced by digital content, social media, storytelling, and online experiences long before making travel decisions. Consequently, destination branding has become a strategic economic activity rather than simply a marketing exercise.

Participants gained insights into how successful destinations build strong and recognizable brands by combining authentic narratives with consistent communication strategies. The discussion emphasized that branding is not only about logos and slogans but about creating a compelling story that reflects the unique character, culture, and aspirations of a place. Effective destination brands communicate a sense of identity that resonates with visitors, investors, and residents alike.

Digital transformation was identified as a critical enabler of modern tourism development. Experts discussed how digital technologies are reshaping the way destinations are managed, promoted, and experienced. Smart tourism solutions, data analytics, digital platforms, virtual experiences, artificial intelligence, and destination management technologies are increasingly becoming essential tools for improving competitiveness and visitor satisfaction.

Participants learned how technology can help destinations better understand visitor behavior, improve service delivery, optimize resource management, and create more personalized travel experiences. The discussion also highlighted the importance of digital readiness among tourism businesses and institutions, particularly as global tourism becomes increasingly data-driven and technology-enabled.

A major focus of the session was the role of the **creative economy** as a driver of tourism innovation and diversification. Speakers explained that industries such as film, design, architecture, music, digital media, visual arts, festivals, cultural events, and creative production are becoming increasingly important contributors to tourism attractiveness and economic development.

The panel demonstrated how creative industries can extend tourism activity beyond traditional seasonal patterns, generate new revenue streams, and increase international visibility for destinations. Film productions, cultural festivals, artistic initiatives, and creative experiences often attract new visitor segments while strengthening local economies and supporting cultural preservation.

For participants, one of the most valuable lessons was understanding that creativity should not be viewed as a peripheral component of tourism but rather as a strategic investment area capable of generating long-term economic returns. Destinations that successfully integrate creative industries into their tourism strategies are often better positioned to differentiate themselves and attract higher-value visitors.

Sustainability remained a recurring theme throughout the discussion. Speakers emphasized that long-term tourism success depends on balancing growth with responsible development practices. Rapid tourism expansion can create economic opportunities, but without careful planning it can also place pressure on natural resources, cultural heritage sites, local communities, and public infrastructure.

Panelists stressed that sustainability should be embedded into all stages of tourism planning and investment decision-making. This includes promoting environmentally responsible infrastructure, preserving cultural assets, supporting local businesses, reducing resource consumption, and ensuring that tourism growth contributes positively to community wellbeing. Participants were encouraged to view sustainability not as a constraint but as a strategic advantage that can enhance destination competitiveness and resilience.

The discussion also generated important reflections on the future of tourism in Albania and the Western Balkans. Speakers highlighted the region's significant untapped potential, including its rich cultural heritage, diverse landscapes, emerging entrepreneurship ecosystems, growing international visibility, and increasing investor interest. At the same time, they emphasized the importance of adopting innovative development models capable of creating higher value-added tourism products and experiences.

For entrepreneurs attending the session, the discussion provided practical insights into identifying new business opportunities within tourism ecosystems. For investors, it offered perspectives on emerging market trends and long-term growth potential. For policymakers and development institutions, the session highlighted the importance of creating supportive frameworks that encourage sustainable investment, innovation, and cross-sector collaboration.

Perhaps the most powerful message that emerged from the session was that **the future of tourism lies at the intersection of place, culture, creativity, technology, and investment**. Destinations that successfully connect these elements are better equipped to create memorable visitor experiences, attract investment, generate employment, strengthen local communities, and build sustainable economic growth.

By the conclusion of the discussion, participants had gained a deeper understanding of tourism as a multidimensional ecosystem rather than a standalone industry. The session demonstrated that tourism competitiveness increasingly depends on collaboration between sectors that have traditionally

operated independently, including real estate, infrastructure, culture, technology, education, entrepreneurship, and creative industries.

As part of BALKONNECT Festival 2026, this session successfully illustrated how integrated approaches to destination development can create lasting economic and social value. It reinforced the importance of strategic thinking, innovation, sustainability, and partnership-building in shaping the future of tourism and provided participants with practical lessons that can be applied across the Western Balkans and beyond.

The discussion ultimately underscored a fundamental principle: destinations that invest not only in physical infrastructure but also in culture, creativity, innovation, and authentic identity will be best positioned to thrive in the tourism economy of the future. Through the exchange of expertise, experiences, and ideas, the session contributed significantly to the festival's broader objective of promoting sustainable development, investment readiness, regional cooperation, and long-term competitiveness.

Season Extension & Destination Management at Balkonnnect Festival 2026



One of the most practical and forward-looking discussions during BALKONNECT Festival 2026 was the session titled **“Season Extension & Destination Management and Hospitality Technology & Experience Design,”** held on 21 May 2026 at the Piramida in Tirana. Bringing together experts from academia, sustainable tourism, destination management, hospitality, technology, tour operations, and

international development, the session explored one of the most pressing challenges facing Albania and the wider Western Balkans tourism sector: how to transition from highly seasonal tourism models toward year-round, resilient, sustainable, and experience-driven tourism economies.

The discussion addressed a reality shared by many destinations across the region. Despite experiencing strong growth in visitor numbers and increasing international recognition, much of the tourism activity remains concentrated within a relatively short summer period. This creates significant economic, operational, and sustainability challenges, including fluctuating employment levels, underutilized infrastructure during off-peak months, pressure on destinations during peak seasons, and reduced investment efficiency. The session therefore focused on identifying practical strategies, innovative tools, and collaborative approaches that can help destinations unlock their full potential throughout the entire year.

Moderated by **Prof. Klodiana Gorica** from the University of Tirana and the Institute for Sustainable Development, Environment and Tourism, the panel created a dynamic and multidimensional discussion that connected academic research, policy perspectives, business realities, and technological innovation. The moderator guided participants through a series of interconnected themes, ensuring that the discussion addressed both strategic and operational dimensions of tourism transformation.

The panel brought together an outstanding group of experts:

- **Prof. Brunilda Liçaj** - Tourism Expert
- **Tomi Ilijaš** - Arctur
- **Madlina Puka Özgür** - Sustainable Tourism Expert, EBRD
- **Gladiola Dona** - Hospitality and Tourism Academy
- **Mireda Caci** - Flower Hotel & Spa
- **Eva Rama** - Albanian Tour Operators Association

From the beginning, the conversation emphasized that seasonality should no longer be viewed simply as a challenge to manage but as an opportunity to redesign tourism systems and create more diversified economic models. Speakers noted that many destinations around the world have successfully transformed themselves from seasonal tourism hotspots into year-round destinations by developing alternative tourism products, investing in experience design, and implementing coordinated destination management strategies.

One of the key lessons shared with participants was that **season extension is not achieved through marketing alone**. Instead, it requires a comprehensive approach that combines product development, infrastructure investments, event programming, cultural experiences, business tourism, wellness offerings, nature-based tourism, and targeted market positioning. Successful destinations create compelling reasons for visitors to travel outside traditional peak periods by offering experiences tailored to different interests and demographics.

The discussion highlighted that Albania and the Western Balkans possess unique assets capable of attracting visitors throughout the year. These include cultural heritage sites, gastronomy, mountain tourism, wellness and health tourism, adventure tourism, rural tourism, creative industries, festivals,

and business events. Speakers encouraged tourism stakeholders to view these assets as strategic tools for diversifying tourism demand and reducing dependence on a single season.

A particularly valuable insight for the audience was the understanding that tourism competitiveness increasingly depends on the ability to manage destinations rather than simply promote them. Panelists stressed that destination management has become a central discipline in modern tourism development. While destination marketing remains important, destinations that succeed in the long term are those capable of coordinating stakeholders, managing resources effectively, monitoring visitor flows, and creating consistent visitor experiences.

The concept of **Destination Management Organizations (DMOs)** and integrated destination management systems was explored in depth. Speakers explained how coordinated planning between municipalities, tourism boards, hospitality providers, transport operators, cultural institutions, and private businesses can create more coherent and attractive tourism ecosystems. Rather than operating independently, stakeholders must work within common frameworks and shared strategic objectives.

Participants learned that successful destination management requires collaboration across traditionally separate sectors. Tourism can no longer be planned in isolation from infrastructure development, environmental protection, cultural preservation, urban planning, mobility systems, digital transformation, and community development. The most competitive destinations are those where all these elements function as part of an integrated ecosystem.

Another major theme was the growing importance of **experience design** in tourism and hospitality. Panelists noted that traveler expectations have changed significantly in recent years. Visitors increasingly seek authentic, personalized, and meaningful experiences rather than simply accommodation and transportation services. Modern tourists want to engage with local culture, discover unique stories, interact with communities, and participate in memorable activities that create emotional connections with destinations.

For hospitality professionals in attendance, the discussion offered practical lessons on how service providers can differentiate themselves through experience innovation. Speakers highlighted that even small businesses can create competitive advantages by focusing on guest experience, storytelling, personalization, and service quality. Experiences that connect visitors with local traditions, gastronomy, crafts, history, and culture often generate stronger visitor satisfaction and encourage repeat visits.

The panel also emphasized that hospitality excellence is no longer measured solely by physical facilities but by the overall quality of the guest journey. Every interaction—from online booking and digital communication to arrival, accommodation, activities, and post-visit engagement—contributes to the visitor experience. Businesses that understand and manage this journey effectively are better positioned to build customer loyalty and strengthen their market position.

Technology emerged as one of the most transformative forces discussed during the session. Experts explored how digital solutions are reshaping tourism planning, destination management, hospitality operations, and visitor experiences. Participants were introduced to examples of smart tourism

technologies that are helping destinations make better decisions, improve efficiency, and respond more effectively to changing market conditions.

Speakers explained how data analytics can help destinations understand visitor behavior, identify emerging trends, monitor tourism impacts, and optimize resource allocation. Advanced digital platforms enable tourism organizations to track visitor movements, evaluate satisfaction levels, forecast demand patterns, and improve marketing effectiveness. These capabilities allow tourism stakeholders to move from reactive decision-making toward more strategic and evidence-based planning.

One of the most important lessons for participants was the realization that data has become a strategic asset for tourism development. Destinations that effectively collect, analyze, and utilize tourism data are better equipped to manage visitor flows, improve services, reduce overcrowding, and identify opportunities for growth during off-peak periods.

Technology was also discussed from the perspective of visitor experience enhancement. Digital booking platforms, mobile applications, virtual reality experiences, smart guides, artificial intelligence tools, and personalized recommendation systems are increasingly influencing how travelers discover, plan, and experience destinations. Panelists encouraged tourism businesses to embrace digital innovation not as a replacement for hospitality but as a tool for strengthening human-centered experiences.

The discussion further explored the role of collaboration among tour operators, hotels, attractions, destination managers, and local governments. Speakers noted that fragmented tourism offerings often reduce destination competitiveness because visitors are forced to navigate disconnected services and experiences. Greater cooperation among stakeholders can create integrated tourism products that deliver more value to visitors while generating stronger economic outcomes for local communities.

Representatives from the tourism industry shared examples of how collaborative packages, coordinated itineraries, shared marketing initiatives, and destination-wide experiences can encourage longer stays and higher visitor spending. Participants learned that cooperation often produces greater benefits than competition, particularly in destinations seeking to establish stronger international visibility.

Sustainability remained a central theme throughout the session. Panelists repeatedly emphasized that extending tourism seasons should not come at the expense of environmental quality, cultural integrity, or community wellbeing. Instead, season extension should be viewed as a tool for creating more balanced tourism development.

Participants learned that year-round tourism can help distribute economic benefits more evenly throughout the year while reducing pressure on destinations during peak periods. By attracting visitors across multiple seasons, destinations can utilize infrastructure more efficiently, create more stable employment opportunities, and improve overall economic resilience.

The panel also highlighted the importance of involving local communities in tourism planning and development. Sustainable tourism requires that residents benefit from tourism growth and actively

participate in shaping destination futures. Community engagement helps preserve authenticity while ensuring that tourism contributes positively to social and economic development.

Several speakers addressed the growing importance of sustainability certifications, responsible tourism standards, and ESG principles within tourism investment and destination management. As travelers become increasingly conscious of environmental and social impacts, destinations that demonstrate commitment to sustainability are likely to gain competitive advantages in international markets.

For policymakers and public institutions attending the session, important lessons emerged regarding governance, strategic planning, and investment priorities. The discussion demonstrated that successful tourism transformation requires long-term vision, institutional coordination, and supportive policy frameworks. Infrastructure investments, digital transformation initiatives, education programmes, workforce development strategies, and innovation support mechanisms all play important roles in building competitive tourism economies.

For entrepreneurs and business owners, the session provided practical insights into market trends, customer expectations, technological innovation, and business opportunities associated with year-round tourism development. Many participants gained valuable perspectives on how to diversify services, improve operational efficiency, strengthen digital capabilities, and enhance customer experiences.

For tourism professionals and destination managers, the discussion reinforced the importance of adopting a holistic approach that views tourism as a complex ecosystem rather than a collection of isolated businesses. The future success of destinations will increasingly depend on their ability to coordinate stakeholders, leverage technology, deliver exceptional experiences, and maintain sustainability while adapting to rapidly changing market conditions.

Perhaps the strongest message that emerged from the session was that **the future of tourism in Albania and the Western Balkans will be defined not by visitor numbers alone, but by the quality, sustainability, resilience, and intelligence of tourism systems.** Destinations that successfully combine strategic planning, technological innovation, stakeholder collaboration, and experience-driven development will be best positioned to compete in the global tourism marketplace.

By the conclusion of the discussion, participants had gained a deeper understanding of the opportunities available for transforming regional tourism models. They left with practical lessons, innovative ideas, and strategic perspectives that can help destinations move beyond seasonal limitations and create more balanced and sustainable tourism economies.

As part of BALKONNECT Festival 2026, the session successfully demonstrated that tourism transformation is not simply about attracting more visitors. It is about designing destinations that create value for visitors, businesses, communities, and investors alike. Through innovation, cooperation, digitalization, and responsible planning, Albania and the Western Balkans have the opportunity to establish themselves as year-round destinations capable of delivering exceptional experiences while generating long-term economic and social benefits.

The discussion ultimately reinforced a clear conclusion: sustainable tourism growth requires a shift from seasonal thinking to ecosystem thinking. By investing in destination management, hospitality excellence, technology adoption, stakeholder collaboration, and experience design, the region can build a stronger, more resilient, and internationally competitive tourism sector capable of thriving throughout all seasons of the year.

Tourism Investment in Albania & the Western Balkans



Opening the Mainstage programme of BALKONNECT Festival 2026, the session “**Tourism Investment in Albania & the Western Balkans**” established a strategic foundation for many of the discussions that followed throughout the festival. Held on 21 May 2026 at the Piramida in Tirana, the session focused on one of the most significant opportunities facing the region today: how Albania and the Western Balkans can transform growing international tourism visibility into sustainable investment, stronger destination competitiveness, and long-term economic development.

As tourism continues to emerge as one of the most dynamic sectors across the region, attracting increasing international attention from travelers, investors, and development institutions, the session explored the critical question of how destinations can move beyond promotional success and create the conditions necessary for large-scale investment and sustainable growth. Bringing together representatives from European institutions, development finance organizations, investment advisory firms, and strategic development experts, the discussion provided participants with valuable insights into the evolving investment landscape and the steps required to position the Western Balkans as a credible and attractive destination for tourism-related investment.

Moderated by **Mark Jensen of BEST International LLC**, the session featured a distinguished panel of international experts and investment stakeholders:

- **Alan Vella** - EU / SMP-EISMEA
- **Fabiola Duro** - INVEST EU
- **Filipe Guimaraes** - Between Galaxies
- **Aida Mujičić** - EBRD

Together, the panelists offered perspectives from public policy, investment facilitation, project financing, private sector development, and regional economic transformation, creating a comprehensive discussion on the opportunities and challenges associated with tourism investment in emerging destinations.

From the outset, speakers emphasized that tourism in Albania and the Western Balkans has entered a new phase of development. While international arrivals have increased significantly in recent years and the region has gained visibility through international media, travel platforms, and tourism rankings, visibility alone is not enough to secure long-term prosperity. The challenge facing destinations today is how to convert attention into investment, visitor interest into economic value, and tourism growth into sustainable development outcomes.

A recurring theme throughout the session was the transition from **tourism promotion to investment readiness**. Panelists argued that many destinations focus heavily on attracting visitors but pay insufficient attention to creating investment frameworks capable of supporting long-term sector development. While marketing campaigns can increase awareness and visitor numbers, sustained growth depends on the availability of quality infrastructure, professional services, investment opportunities, and supportive institutional environments.

Participants learned that tourism investment readiness requires destinations to think strategically about their assets, development priorities, and long-term vision. Successful destinations are not those that simply attract tourists but those that create environments where investors can identify opportunities, assess risks, and implement projects with confidence. This requires a combination of planning, governance, infrastructure development, regulatory clarity, and institutional support.

One of the most important lessons shared during the discussion was the need to transform tourism potential into **bankable projects**. Speakers emphasized that investors do not invest in concepts or aspirations alone; they invest in projects that demonstrate clear market demand, financial viability, operational feasibility, and long-term sustainability. As a result, destinations must develop professional project pipelines that are supported by credible market analysis, robust business models, and transparent implementation frameworks.

Panelists noted that Albania and the Western Balkans possess significant competitive advantages, including attractive coastlines, mountain landscapes, rich cultural heritage, growing accessibility, competitive costs, and increasing international recognition. However, unlocking the full economic value of these assets requires more sophisticated approaches to investment development and project preparation.

The discussion highlighted the importance of creating investment opportunities across the entire tourism value chain. While hospitality infrastructure remains a key area of interest, tourism investment today extends far beyond hotels and resorts. Opportunities exist in destination management systems, wellness tourism, eco-tourism, marinas, cultural attractions, conference and event facilities, tourism technology solutions, transportation infrastructure, adventure tourism, sustainable mobility, and experience-based tourism products.

A major focus of the session was the issue of **investor confidence**. Speakers emphasized that attracting international investors requires destinations to build trust through transparency, consistency, and professionalism. Institutional investors, development finance institutions, and international investment funds evaluate destinations not only based on market potential but also on governance quality, regulatory stability, and implementation capacity.

Participants learned that clear governance frameworks play a crucial role in reducing investment risk. Predictable regulatory environments, transparent permitting processes, effective public-private cooperation mechanisms, and long-term development strategies all contribute to creating investment-friendly conditions. Destinations that can demonstrate stability and professionalism are generally more successful in attracting long-term capital.

Several panelists highlighted that successful tourism investment increasingly depends on partnerships between the public and private sectors. Governments and municipalities play important roles in providing infrastructure, planning frameworks, and regulatory support, while private investors contribute capital, operational expertise, innovation, and market-driven solutions. The most successful tourism ecosystems are often those where these sectors collaborate effectively toward shared development goals.

Another major theme of the session was the growing importance of **sustainability and ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) criteria** in tourism investment decisions. Speakers emphasized that global investment trends are changing rapidly, with investors increasingly prioritizing projects that demonstrate positive environmental and social impact alongside financial returns.

Participants gained valuable insights into how sustainability considerations are influencing capital allocation across the tourism sector. Investors are increasingly assessing factors such as environmental management, resource efficiency, community engagement, climate resilience, biodiversity protection, and governance practices when evaluating tourism projects.

The panel stressed that sustainability should not be viewed merely as a compliance requirement but as a competitive advantage. Destinations and projects that integrate ESG principles into their development strategies are often better positioned to attract funding, secure partnerships, and meet the expectations of modern travelers and investors alike.

For participants from the public sector, the discussion provided important lessons regarding the role of sustainability in destination planning. Tourism growth that fails to protect natural resources, cultural heritage, and community wellbeing may generate short-term gains but often undermines

long-term competitiveness. Sustainable tourism investment therefore requires balancing economic development objectives with environmental stewardship and social responsibility.

A significant portion of the discussion focused on the role of **European Union programmes and international financial institutions** in supporting tourism investment and regional development. Representatives from EU-supported initiatives and development finance institutions explained how various funding instruments, technical assistance programmes, and investment platforms are helping strengthen project pipelines and improve investment readiness across the region.

Participants learned that European institutions are increasingly supporting initiatives that promote innovation, sustainability, digital transformation, and regional cooperation within tourism. Such programmes can help destinations overcome common challenges related to financing, project preparation, capacity building, and market development.

The contribution of development finance institutions was particularly relevant in highlighting how investment risk can be reduced through strategic partnerships and blended financing mechanisms. By combining public and private resources, development institutions help create conditions that encourage greater private sector participation in tourism development projects.

The discussion also addressed the importance of regional cooperation and cross-border tourism strategies. Speakers noted that international travelers often view the Western Balkans as a single travel region rather than a collection of separate national destinations. As a result, there are significant opportunities to strengthen competitiveness through collaborative destination development, regional marketing initiatives, and integrated tourism experiences.

Participants were encouraged to consider how regional cooperation can increase visitor flows, extend visitor stays, and create larger investment opportunities. Cross-border tourism routes, thematic tourism products, shared branding initiatives, and coordinated investment promotion strategies can help position the Western Balkans more effectively within global tourism markets.

Another key theme was **destination positioning and strategic storytelling**. Panelists argued that tourism investment is influenced not only by economic indicators but also by how destinations communicate their vision, strengths, and future potential. Investors are increasingly attracted to destinations that present coherent narratives supported by clear development strategies and measurable objectives.

The discussion emphasized that Albania and the Western Balkans must move beyond fragmented tourism narratives and develop stronger regional positioning. Rather than competing primarily on price or isolated attractions, the region should emphasize its unique combination of natural beauty, cultural diversity, entrepreneurial energy, strategic location, and emerging investment opportunities.

For entrepreneurs and business leaders attending the session, the discussion provided valuable lessons on understanding investor expectations and preparing projects for investment. Speakers emphasized the importance of professionalism, transparency, market intelligence, and strategic planning in attracting capital and building successful tourism ventures.

For policymakers and development organizations, the session reinforced the importance of creating enabling environments that encourage investment while supporting sustainable development goals. Strategic planning, institutional capacity building, infrastructure investments, and stakeholder coordination were all identified as critical components of successful tourism investment ecosystems.

For investors and financial institutions, the discussion highlighted the significant opportunities available throughout the region, particularly in destinations that are demonstrating strong growth, increasing international visibility, and commitment to long-term development strategies.

Throughout the session, panelists shared practical examples, market observations, and strategic recommendations that provided participants with a deeper understanding of the evolving tourism investment landscape. Discussions reflected both optimism about the region's future and recognition of the work still required to transform potential into tangible economic outcomes.

Perhaps the most important lesson for the audience was that **tourism growth alone does not guarantee economic transformation**. Sustainable value creation requires structured investment frameworks, professional project development, strong governance, strategic partnerships, and long-term vision. Destinations that successfully combine these elements will be best positioned to attract capital, create employment, improve competitiveness, and generate lasting economic benefits.

By the conclusion of the session, participants had gained a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with tourism investment in Albania and the Western Balkans. They left with practical insights into investment readiness, project development, sustainability, regional cooperation, and destination strategy that can inform future initiatives across both public and private sectors.

As the opening Mainstage session of BALKONNECT Festival 2026, the discussion successfully established a central theme that resonated throughout the festival: the importance of turning visibility into value, potential into investment, and regional ambition into measurable economic impact. It demonstrated that the future of tourism in the Western Balkans will depend not only on attracting visitors but on creating investment ecosystems capable of supporting innovation, sustainability, competitiveness, and long-term prosperity.

Ultimately, the session reinforced a powerful conclusion: Albania and the Western Balkans possess many of the ingredients required for tourism success, but realizing that potential will require coordinated action, strategic investment, international collaboration, and a commitment to building destinations that are not only attractive to visitors but also credible, resilient, and investment-ready for the future.

World Business Angels Forum: Western Balkans Meetup



The **WBAF Western Balkans Meetup**, held as an official side event within **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, brought a strong and highly relevant global investment dimension to Tirana, positioning the Western Balkans more firmly within the international discourse on angel investing, early-stage startup financing, and cross-border entrepreneurial ecosystem development. Taking place on **21 May 2026 at the Piramida in Tirana**, the session served as a strategic bridge between the region's rapidly emerging startup ecosystem and established global networks of angel investors, venture builders, institutional innovation leaders, and ecosystem development organizations.

By integrating the Western Balkans into the broader activities of the **World Business Angels Forum (WBAF)** network, the meetup highlighted the increasing importance of global connectivity in shaping the future of innovation and entrepreneurship. The session emphasized that startup ecosystems can no longer develop in isolation; instead, they must be embedded within international capital flows, knowledge networks, mentorship structures, and collaborative investment platforms that allow local ideas to evolve into globally competitive ventures.

A central focus of the discussion was the concept of **investment readiness**, particularly in the context of early-stage startups across the Western Balkans. Speakers and participants analyzed the current state of the regional entrepreneurial landscape, noting that while the region demonstrates strong levels of creativity, technical talent, and entrepreneurial ambition, there remains a need to further strengthen structured pathways toward investment, scalability, and international market access.

The discussion highlighted that investment readiness is not solely about attracting capital, but about developing a comprehensive ecosystem that enables startups to meet global investor expectations. This includes improving business model quality, strengthening governance structures, enhancing financial planning capabilities, increasing access to mentorship, and building stronger connections between founders and experienced international investors.

One of the most important messages delivered throughout the session was that **access to smart capital is more valuable than access to capital alone**. Speakers emphasized that angel investors play a critical role in early-stage ecosystem development not only through financial investment, but also by providing strategic mentorship, operational guidance, industry expertise, and access to global networks. These non-financial contributions are often decisive in helping startups navigate early challenges and achieve sustainable growth.

The meetup further explored the evolving role of **angel investment ecosystems** as foundational pillars of innovation-driven economies. Participants learned that successful startup ecosystems around the world are typically built on strong networks of angel investors who are willing to take early risks, support experimentation, and invest in unproven but high-potential ideas. In this context, the development of structured angel networks in the Western Balkans was identified as a key priority for strengthening regional competitiveness.

Another major theme of the discussion was **global connectivity and borderless innovation**. Speakers stressed that innovation today is inherently international, with startups competing and collaborating across markets from the earliest stages of development. As a result, regional ecosystems must actively integrate into global networks in order to remain competitive. Platforms such as WBAF were presented as essential mechanisms for enabling this integration by connecting local entrepreneurs with international investors, mentors, and strategic partners.

Participants gained a deeper understanding of how global exposure can significantly accelerate startup development. By engaging with international investors, founders are not only able to secure funding but also gain valuable insights into market expectations, scalability requirements, and competitive positioning. This exposure helps startups refine their business models and prepare for expansion beyond domestic markets.

The discussion also placed strong emphasis on the importance of **ecosystem building and entrepreneurship education**. Speakers underlined that successful startup environments are not created through investment alone, but through coordinated efforts involving multiple stakeholders, including investors, policymakers, universities, accelerators, incubators, innovation hubs, and industry associations.

Participants learned that sustainable ecosystem development requires long-term commitment to education and capacity building. This includes developing entrepreneurship curricula, strengthening university-industry collaboration, supporting startup training programmes, and fostering a culture of innovation and risk-taking among young entrepreneurs. Without these foundational elements, access to funding alone is insufficient to ensure long-term ecosystem success.

A further key insight from the session was the importance of **trust as a foundational element of investment ecosystems**. Speakers emphasized that angel investing is built on personal relationships, credibility, and confidence in both founders and ecosystem structures. Trust between investors and entrepreneurs is essential for enabling early-stage risk-taking and fostering long-term collaboration.

The conversation also highlighted the growing importance of **cross-border collaboration within angel investment networks**. By connecting investors and entrepreneurs across different countries, ecosystems can significantly expand their access to capital, expertise, and market opportunities. This cross-border approach was presented as particularly relevant for the Western Balkans, where regional cooperation can help overcome the limitations of smaller individual markets.

The session featured contributions from leading figures in the global angel investment community, including:

- **Baybars Altuntaş** - Executive Chairman, World Business Angels Forum
- **Prof. Enriko Ceko** - WBAF Senior Senator for Albania
- **Manos Ioannidis** - WBAF Senior Associate for Greece
- **Ms. Katrina Victoria Gumaya** - WBAF Senator for the Philippines

Each speaker contributed unique perspectives drawn from different investment ecosystems, offering comparative insights into how various regions have successfully developed angel investment networks, supported startup growth, and built innovation-driven economies. Their contributions provided participants with practical lessons on ecosystem structuring, investor engagement strategies, and the importance of international cooperation in scaling entrepreneurial activity.

Throughout the discussion, participants explored real-world experiences from different global markets, identifying best practices that can be adapted to the Western Balkans context. These included the importance of early-stage risk capital availability, structured mentorship programmes, investor-founder matchmaking platforms, and institutional support mechanisms that reduce barriers to startup growth.

Beyond financial investment, the session consistently reinforced a broader vision of ecosystem development based on **connectivity, trust, knowledge exchange, and opportunity creation**. Speakers emphasized that the most successful startup ecosystems are those that foster collaboration across borders, disciplines, and sectors, enabling entrepreneurs to access diverse sources of support and inspiration.

Another important takeaway for participants was the recognition that **startup success increasingly depends on global mindset adoption from the earliest stages of development**. Entrepreneurs were encouraged to think beyond local markets, design scalable business models, and engage with international networks early in their journey. This global orientation is essential for building startups capable of competing in highly dynamic and competitive international environments.

The session also underscored the strategic importance of positioning the Western Balkans as an **emerging innovation and investment hub**. Speakers noted that the region is increasingly gaining visibility among international investors, but that continued progress will depend on strengthening

institutional frameworks, improving ecosystem coordination, and increasing participation in global investment platforms.

Participants learned that visibility alone is not sufficient; it must be accompanied by structured ecosystem development, consistent policy support, and active engagement with international partners. By building stronger links with global networks such as WBAF, the Western Balkans can significantly enhance its ability to attract investment, retain talent, and support the growth of high-potential startups.

For policymakers and ecosystem developers, the discussion provided valuable insights into the importance of creating supportive regulatory and institutional environments for angel investing. This includes facilitating investment mechanisms, encouraging private sector participation, and promoting collaboration between public institutions and investor networks.

For entrepreneurs, the session offered practical lessons on how to approach investors, structure business models, and prepare for scaling. For investors, it provided a deeper understanding of the untapped potential in the Western Balkans and the opportunities available in supporting early-stage innovation in the region.

By the conclusion of the meetup, participants had gained a comprehensive understanding of how angel investment ecosystems function and how they can be strengthened in emerging markets. The discussions highlighted both the opportunities and challenges facing the Western Balkans startup landscape and provided actionable insights for future development.

As part of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, the WBAF Western Balkans Meetup reinforced the festival's broader mission of connecting regional ambition with international opportunity. It demonstrated that innovation ecosystems thrive when capital, knowledge, mentorship, and networks are effectively aligned across borders.

Ultimately, the session delivered a clear and powerful message: the future of innovation in the Western Balkans will be shaped by its ability to integrate into global angel investment networks, strengthen ecosystem collaboration, and build a generation of entrepreneurs capable of competing and succeeding on the international stage. By fostering trust, connectivity, and opportunity, initiatives such as this meetup play a crucial role in transforming regional potential into global impact.

Networking Cocktail



The first day of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026** concluded with a high-level **Networking Cocktail session** held at **18:30 at the top of the Piramida in Tirana**, offering participants a distinctive and symbolic closing moment after a full day of intensive discussions, institutional dialogues, mainstage sessions, and thematic panels. With approximately **35 carefully selected participants**, the gathering created an intimate, high-quality networking environment that blended professional exchange with a relaxed atmosphere, overlooking the panoramic skyline of Tirana from one of the city's most iconic contemporary landmarks.

The setting at the Piramida rooftop carried strong symbolic value, reflecting the transformation of the venue itself into a space for innovation, dialogue, and international collaboration. As daylight transitioned into evening, the environment naturally encouraged openness and reflection, allowing participants to move beyond formal programming and engage in deeper, more personal conversations about the ideas, insights, and opportunities presented throughout the day.

The cocktail session brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including speakers from the mainstage sessions, representatives of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), institutional partners, international guests, ecosystem builders, investors, entrepreneurs, and members of the organizing team. This carefully curated mix ensured that discussions remained relevant, strategic, and focused on potential future collaboration across multiple sectors and regions.

Throughout the evening, conversations built directly upon the themes explored during the festival's formal sessions. Participants continued discussions on **investment opportunities, regional economic cooperation, innovation ecosystems, tourism development, infrastructure projects, sustainability transitions, and cross-border business partnerships**. The informal nature of the setting allowed ideas to flow more freely, enabling participants to explore synergies that may not have fully emerged during structured panel discussions.

A defining feature of the networking cocktail was its ability to bridge institutional perspectives with entrepreneurial energy. Representatives of development finance institutions engaged in direct dialogue with startups, business founders, and ecosystem organizations, while policymakers and investment experts exchanged views with private sector leaders. This cross-sector interaction reinforced the festival's broader mission of fostering integrated dialogue between capital, ideas, and implementation capacity.

The atmosphere reflected the core identity of BALKONNECT Festival as a platform rooted in **openness, international collaboration, and ecosystem connectivity**. Rather than functioning as a purely social event, the cocktail session served as a continuation of the day's strategic conversations, enabling participants to strengthen relationships, validate ideas, and identify concrete opportunities for cooperation.

One of the most significant aspects of the evening was the quality of interaction enabled by the limited and curated participant group. With approximately 35 attendees, the event maintained a balance between diversity and intimacy, ensuring that each conversation carried depth and relevance. This format allowed participants to move beyond superficial networking and instead engage in meaningful exchanges focused on long-term collaboration and shared objectives.

Discussions naturally evolved across a wide range of thematic areas, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the festival. Participants engaged in conversations spanning **finance and investment, renewable energy, tourism and destination development, digital transformation, infrastructure planning, innovation ecosystems, and sustainable economic development**. This diversity of topics highlighted the interconnected nature of modern economic challenges and opportunities, where progress in one sector often depends on collaboration across multiple domains.

The rooftop setting at Piramida provided a unique experiential dimension to the evening. Overlooking Tirana as the city transitioned into night, participants were able to reflect on the day's insights while simultaneously envisioning future collaborations in a relaxed yet strategically significant environment. The physical setting reinforced the metaphorical purpose of the gathering: connecting vision with reality, and ideas with action.

A key outcome of the networking cocktail was the strengthening of trust-based relationships among participants. In many cases, initial introductions made during formal sessions were further developed into more detailed conversations about potential partnerships, project development, investment opportunities, and institutional cooperation. These informal interactions are often critical in transforming conceptual interest into actionable collaboration, particularly in complex, cross-border environments.

The event also played an important role in reinforcing the festival's ecosystem-building approach. By providing structured yet informal opportunities for engagement, BALKONNECT Festival 2026 ensured that networking was not treated as a secondary activity but as an integral component of its overall impact strategy. The cocktail session demonstrated that meaningful economic and institutional cooperation often emerges through dialogue that extends beyond formal agendas.

Throughout the evening, the spirit of “**Business Without Borders**” was clearly present. Conversations frequently crossed national, sectoral, and institutional boundaries, reflecting the festival's ambition to create a platform where geography is not a limitation but a connector. Participants shared perspectives from different countries and markets, exchanging insights on regulatory environments, investment climates, innovation trends, and development priorities.

As the sun set over Tirana and the city lights began to emerge, the networking cocktail marked both a conclusion and a continuation. While it formally closed the first day of the festival, it simultaneously extended its impact by ensuring that discussions, ideas, and relationships would continue to develop beyond the structured program. Many participants indicated that conversations initiated during the evening would carry forward into the following day's sessions, bilateral meetings, and post-festival collaborations.

In this sense, the Networking Cocktail was far more than a social gathering. It functioned as a strategic bridge between formal programming and real-world cooperation, reinforcing the festival's core objective of transforming dialogue into action. By creating a space where trust, openness, and collaboration could develop naturally, the session significantly contributed to the overall effectiveness and long-term impact of BALKONNECT Festival 2026.

Ultimately, the evening embodied the essence of the festival itself: a platform where ideas meet opportunity, where institutions connect with entrepreneurs, and where regional ambition is translated into international cooperation. Against the backdrop of Tirana's skyline, the Networking Cocktail stood as a powerful reminder that the future of regional development is built not only in conference rooms and panel discussions, but also in the human connections formed when people come together with a shared vision for progress.

Renewables & Green Growth Reality in the Western Balkans



Opening the second day of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, the session titled “**Renewables & Green Growth Reality in the Western Balkans**” set a decisive and forward-looking tone for discussions on the region’s energy future. Held on **22 May 2026 at the Piramida in Tirana**, the session focused on one of the most urgent and transformative agendas of the decade: how the Western Balkans can move beyond policy-level green ambitions and translate them into concrete investment, operational projects, and scalable private-sector-driven renewable energy systems.

Bringing together energy executives, infrastructure developers, investment professionals, technology innovators, and sustainability experts, the session examined the current state of the renewable energy transition in the region, while also addressing the structural conditions required to accelerate progress. The discussion reflected a growing consensus that the Western Balkans is entering a pivotal phase where energy transformation is no longer optional or theoretical, but an immediate economic, environmental, and geopolitical necessity.

Moderated by **Entela Pinguli**, Environmental Expert at Eco Partners for Sustainable Development, the session provided a structured yet dynamic platform for solution-oriented dialogue. The moderator guided participants through a comprehensive exploration of both opportunities and constraints,

ensuring that the discussion remained focused on practical implementation pathways rather than abstract policy aspirations.

The panel featured a distinguished group of regional and international energy and finance leaders:

- **Visar Kelmendi** - CEO, GET - Green Energy Technologies
- **Vladimír Příkryl** - COO, DEVINN s.r.o.
- **Hamsa Thota** - President, IBD Inc.
- **Marcela Mehmeti** - Associate Banker, EBRD
- **Bruno Papaj** - CEO & Co-Founder, Vega Group

Together, the speakers provided a multi-dimensional perspective on renewable energy development, combining technical expertise, investment insight, financial structuring knowledge, and real-world implementation experience from different markets and sectors.

From the beginning of the session, a central message emerged clearly: the Western Balkans possesses significant untapped renewable energy potential, particularly in **solar, wind, hydro, and emerging hybrid systems**, but realizing this potential requires far more than natural resources alone. It demands strong institutional frameworks, predictable regulatory environments, robust infrastructure planning, and the active participation of private capital.

Speakers emphasized that the region is increasingly attractive for renewable energy investment due to its geographic advantages, growing energy demand, and alignment with European decarbonization goals. However, they also stressed that attractiveness alone does not guarantee project realization. The key challenge lies in transforming potential into **investable, structured, and bankable projects** capable of meeting international financing standards.

A significant portion of the discussion was dedicated to the transition from **strategic ambition to real-world implementation**. Panelists highlighted a recurring gap in many emerging energy markets: while national strategies and policy frameworks often outline ambitious renewable energy targets, the pipeline of executable projects frequently remains limited. This gap between planning and execution was identified as one of the most critical bottlenecks in the region's energy transition.

Participants learned that successful renewable energy ecosystems require more than vision documents; they require **project readiness, technical feasibility, financial structuring, and risk mitigation mechanisms**. Without these elements, even well-designed strategies risk remaining unimplemented.

The discussion further explored how **solar and wind energy projects are becoming increasingly competitive and economically viable** in the Western Balkans. Technological advancements, declining equipment costs, and improved efficiency are making renewable energy more accessible than ever before. However, speakers noted that technology alone is not sufficient; regulatory frameworks, grid capacity, permitting processes, and investment structures play equally important roles in determining project success.

A major theme that emerged was the importance of **energy infrastructure modernization**, particularly in relation to grid systems and energy storage solutions. As renewable energy production becomes more decentralized and intermittent, the need for smart grids, digital monitoring systems, and advanced storage technologies becomes increasingly essential. These innovations enable greater system flexibility, stability, and integration of renewable sources into national energy systems.

Participants were introduced to the concept that **energy transition is not only about generation, but about system transformation**. This includes upgrading transmission networks, integrating digital technologies, improving demand management, and ensuring interoperability across regional energy markets.

Financing was identified as one of the most decisive factors shaping the pace of renewable energy development. Speakers highlighted the importance of **blended finance structures**, development bank involvement, and private capital mobilization in bridging the gap between project ambition and implementation capacity. Institutions such as development banks play a critical role in de-risking investments, providing technical assistance, and supporting early-stage project development.

The panel also emphasized that **access to structured financing is often the determining factor between projects that remain conceptual and those that reach execution**. Without appropriate financial mechanisms, even technically viable renewable energy projects may fail to progress beyond planning stages.

Another key topic was the importance of **regional cooperation in energy development**. Speakers stressed that energy systems in the Western Balkans are highly interconnected and that cross-border collaboration can significantly improve efficiency, resilience, and investment attractiveness. By developing integrated energy markets, shared infrastructure, and coordinated regulatory approaches, countries in the region can enhance energy security while also attracting larger-scale international investment.

Participants discussed how regional energy integration can help balance supply and demand fluctuations, optimize resource allocation, and reduce costs. Such cooperation also strengthens the region's position within broader European energy networks, aligning it more closely with EU energy transition frameworks and climate objectives.

Environmental sustainability and climate alignment were also central themes throughout the discussion. Panelists emphasized the importance of ensuring that renewable energy expansion is consistent with broader **environmental protection goals, carbon reduction targets, and sustainability standards**. The energy transition was framed not only as an economic opportunity but also as a responsibility toward future generations and ecological preservation.

Speakers highlighted that alignment with European green transition policies is increasingly important for attracting international investment and ensuring long-term competitiveness. Projects that meet high environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards are more likely to secure financing and benefit from international partnerships.

The session also addressed the role of **private sector innovation and technological advancement** in accelerating the energy transition. Participants explored how companies are developing new solutions in areas such as smart energy management, renewable integration systems, predictive maintenance technologies, and decentralized energy models. These innovations are helping to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and increase system reliability across renewable energy projects.

Throughout the discussion, panelists shared practical insights from their professional experience, offering real-world examples of renewable project development, cross-border collaboration, investment structuring, and technology deployment. These insights helped ground the conversation in practical realities, bridging the gap between policy discussions and on-the-ground implementation challenges.

For investors and financial institutions attending the session, the discussion provided a clearer understanding of the risk-return profile of renewable energy projects in the Western Balkans, as well as the conditions required to improve investment confidence. For policymakers, it highlighted the importance of regulatory clarity, institutional coordination, and long-term planning consistency. For private sector participants, it offered strategic insights into partnership opportunities, market trends, and technology adoption pathways.

A key takeaway for all participants was that the Western Balkans is entering a **critical transition phase**, where the success of green growth will depend on the ability to convert strategic ambitions into tangible infrastructure and measurable outcomes. The energy transition is no longer a distant objective; it is an active process requiring immediate coordination, investment, and execution.

The discussion concluded with a shared recognition that renewable energy development in the region is not only an environmental imperative but also a major economic opportunity. Properly structured, the energy transition can drive job creation, attract foreign investment, enhance energy independence, and position the Western Balkans as an emerging contributor to Europe's broader sustainability agenda.

As part of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, this session underscored the urgency and complexity of the energy transformation underway. It highlighted both the challenges that must be addressed and the significant opportunities available if the region is able to align policy, investment, technology, and collaboration effectively.

Ultimately, the session delivered a clear and powerful message: **the future of energy in the Western Balkans will be defined not by ambition alone, but by execution, cooperation, and the ability to turn green vision into real, scalable, and sustainable infrastructure that delivers long-term impact for economies, societies, and the environment.**

Green Buildings & Energy Efficiency at Balkonnnect Festival 2026



At **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, the Mainstage session titled “**Green Buildings & Energy Efficiency and Circular Economy for SMEs**” delivered one of the most practical and business-oriented discussions of the festival, bringing together leading experts in sustainability, ESG frameworks, green finance, climate innovation, construction efficiency, and circular economy transformation. Held on **22 May 2026 at the Piramida in Tirana**, the session focused on a rapidly evolving reality across Southeast Europe: environmental sustainability is no longer a niche policy objective, but a core driver of business competitiveness, investment attractiveness, and long-term economic resilience.

The discussion placed particular emphasis on the role of **small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)**, which represent the backbone of regional economies but often face structural challenges in adopting green technologies and sustainability practices. Speakers highlighted that SMEs are now at the center of Europe’s green transition agenda, as they are increasingly required to align with environmental standards, energy efficiency regulations, and ESG reporting frameworks in order to access financing, enter international markets, and maintain competitiveness.

From the outset, the session framed sustainability not as a cost burden but as a **strategic transformation opportunity**. Panelists emphasized that businesses which proactively adopt green practices are more likely to achieve operational efficiency, reduce long-term costs, enhance brand

reputation, and secure access to increasingly sustainability-driven financial instruments. In this sense, the green transition was presented not as a constraint on business activity, but as a pathway to innovation, productivity improvement, and market expansion.

A central focus of the discussion was the growing importance of **green buildings and energy efficiency standards**. Speakers explored how modern construction practices, energy-efficient architectural design, smart building technologies, and sustainable material usage are reshaping the built environment across the region. Participants learned that buildings are among the largest consumers of energy globally, and therefore represent one of the most impactful areas for reducing emissions and improving environmental performance.

Panelists explained how energy-efficient buildings can significantly reduce operational costs for businesses, particularly in sectors such as hospitality, manufacturing, retail, and office infrastructure. Investments in insulation systems, renewable energy integration, smart heating and cooling systems, and energy management technologies were identified as key tools for improving building performance while simultaneously reducing environmental impact.

The discussion further highlighted that **energy efficiency is increasingly becoming a financial metric as well as an environmental one**. Buildings and business facilities that meet high energy performance standards are more attractive to investors, tenants, and financial institutions, as they represent lower operational risk and higher long-term value retention.

Another major theme of the session was the importance of **ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) readiness for SMEs**. Speakers emphasized that ESG frameworks are no longer limited to large corporations but are rapidly becoming standard expectations across supply chains, investment decisions, and financial services. SMEs that fail to adapt to ESG requirements risk losing access to financing, partnerships, and international market opportunities.

Participants gained insight into how ESG frameworks are used by banks, investors, and development institutions to assess business sustainability, risk exposure, and long-term viability. The discussion emphasized that ESG is not simply a reporting obligation, but a strategic management tool that helps companies improve transparency, strengthen governance, and enhance operational performance.

A particularly important message delivered during the session was that **ESG adoption can serve as a competitive differentiator for SMEs**, enabling them to position themselves more effectively in both regional and international markets. Businesses that demonstrate strong environmental and social responsibility are increasingly favored by investors, customers, and institutional partners.

The conversation also explored the growing relevance of the **circular economy model**, which represents a fundamental shift away from traditional linear production systems toward more sustainable, resource-efficient approaches. Speakers explained that circular economy principles focus on reducing waste, extending product lifecycles, reusing materials, and designing systems that minimize environmental impact while maximizing resource efficiency.

Participants were introduced to practical applications of circular economy strategies across sectors such as construction, manufacturing, packaging, and retail. Examples included material recycling

systems, eco-design principles, industrial symbiosis, waste-to-resource conversion, and sustainable supply chain management.

Panelists emphasized that circular economy approaches are not only environmentally beneficial but also economically advantageous. By reducing dependency on raw materials, optimizing resource usage, and minimizing waste disposal costs, businesses can significantly improve operational efficiency and profitability. In addition, circular models create opportunities for innovation, new business models, and green entrepreneurship.

Access to **green finance and sustainability-focused funding mechanisms** was another key topic of discussion. Speakers highlighted the increasing availability of financial instruments designed specifically to support businesses in their transition toward sustainable practices. These include green loans, energy efficiency financing programs, climate investment funds, and development bank-supported initiatives.

Participants learned that financial institutions are increasingly integrating sustainability criteria into lending decisions, meaning that businesses with strong environmental performance and clear transition plans are more likely to secure funding. This shift reflects a broader transformation in global finance, where environmental impact is becoming a central component of investment evaluation.

The panel also emphasized the importance of technical assistance and capacity-building programs that help SMEs understand and implement sustainability standards. Many businesses face challenges not only in accessing finance but also in developing the technical expertise required to design and execute green transformation strategies. Development organizations and international partners play a critical role in bridging this gap through advisory services, training programs, and pilot projects.

Moderated by **Maria Tsiadi**, ESG Consultant at Impacta ESG Consulting, the session featured a distinguished group of experts who provided diverse perspectives from finance, development cooperation, green building policy, and sustainability consulting:

- **Alma Lulja** - Deputy Coordinator, EBRD GEFF
- **Lindita Daija** - CD Expert, LuxDev
- **Annabel Egert** - Manager, Novaspace
- **Fahrush Azemi** - President, Kosovo Green Building Council

Each panelist contributed practical insights into how sustainability frameworks are being implemented across different sectors and countries, offering participants a comparative understanding of regional and international best practices.

Throughout the discussion, speakers shared real-world experiences related to energy efficiency upgrades, green building certification processes, SME financing challenges, and successful examples of sustainability-driven business transformation. These insights helped ground the conversation in practical realities, demonstrating that the green transition is already underway but requires accelerated implementation to achieve meaningful impact at scale.

A recurring lesson for participants was that **sustainability is no longer a future-oriented aspiration but a present-day business imperative**. Companies that delay adaptation risk falling behind in increasingly regulated and competitive markets, while those that invest early in green transformation are better positioned to capture emerging opportunities, reduce long-term risks, and strengthen resilience against economic and environmental shocks.

The discussion also highlighted the interconnected nature of sustainability challenges, emphasizing that progress in one area—such as energy efficiency—often depends on improvements in governance, financing, technology adoption, and workforce capacity. As a result, successful green transformation requires coordinated action across multiple stakeholders, including businesses, financial institutions, policymakers, and development partners.

For SMEs attending the session, the discussion provided actionable insights into how to begin or accelerate their sustainability journey, including practical steps such as conducting energy audits, improving resource efficiency, exploring green financing options, and integrating ESG principles into business strategy. For investors and financial institutions, it provided a clearer understanding of the SME landscape and the opportunities available in supporting green transformation across the region.

For policymakers and ecosystem developers, the session reinforced the importance of creating enabling environments that support SME participation in the green economy. This includes regulatory frameworks that encourage energy efficiency, financial instruments that reduce investment risk, and capacity-building initiatives that strengthen technical expertise.

By the conclusion of the session, participants had gained a comprehensive understanding of how sustainability is reshaping the business landscape in Southeast Europe. The discussion demonstrated that green transformation is not only about environmental responsibility but also about economic competitiveness, innovation capacity, and long-term resilience.

As part of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, this session underscored the critical role of SMEs in driving the green transition and highlighted the importance of integrating sustainability into every level of business decision-making. It reinforced the idea that the future of regional competitiveness will depend heavily on the ability of businesses to adapt, innovate, and align with global sustainability standards.

Ultimately, the session delivered a clear and unified message: **green transformation is no longer optional for SMEs—it is a strategic necessity that defines access to finance, market relevance, and long-term business survival in an increasingly sustainability-driven global economy.**

Urban & Tourism Infrastructure



At **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, the Mainstage session titled “**Urban & Tourism Infrastructure Projects: Energy, Mobility and Circular Infrastructure in International Cooperation**” delivered a comprehensive and highly strategic discussion on the future of infrastructure-led development across the Western Balkans. Bringing together leading voices from infrastructure finance, urban development, international cooperation frameworks, skills and workforce development, and cross-border economic partnerships, the session examined how modern infrastructure systems can redefine urban competitiveness, strengthen tourism economies, and accelerate sustainable transformation across the region.

Held on **22 May 2026 at the Piramida in Tirana**, the session focused on one of the most critical development challenges facing Southeast Europe: how to design, finance, and implement infrastructure projects that are not only technically sound, but also economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and strategically aligned with long-term urban and regional development objectives.

From the outset, the discussion framed infrastructure as far more than a physical asset. Speakers emphasized that **modern infrastructure represents a multidimensional system that integrates economic productivity, environmental performance, social inclusion, and territorial connectivity**. In this sense, infrastructure was presented as a foundational pillar for both urban transformation and tourism development, shaping how cities function, how people move, how businesses operate, and how destinations compete internationally.

The session highlighted the increasingly interconnected nature of **urban infrastructure, energy systems, and mobility networks**, noting that these sectors can no longer be planned in isolation. Instead, they must be developed as integrated ecosystems that support broader economic and environmental goals. Participants explored how improvements in transport connectivity, energy efficiency, and urban planning directly influence tourism flows, investment attractiveness, and quality of life in cities and regions.

A central theme of the discussion was the concept of **infrastructure as a driver of long-term value creation**. Panelists emphasized that well-designed infrastructure projects generate benefits far beyond their immediate functional purpose. They contribute to increased productivity, improved service delivery, enhanced tourism competitiveness, stronger regional integration, and more resilient urban environments. In this context, infrastructure was positioned as a strategic investment in future economic capacity rather than a short-term construction activity.

One of the most important topics addressed during the session was **project bankability and investment readiness**. Speakers highlighted that despite the significant infrastructure needs across the Western Balkans, the success of project implementation often depends on the ability to structure projects in a way that meets international financing standards. This includes clear feasibility studies, robust financial models, transparent governance structures, and well-defined risk management frameworks.

Participants learned that international investors and development finance institutions require a high level of **project preparation maturity** before committing capital. This includes not only technical documentation but also institutional readiness, regulatory clarity, environmental compliance, and long-term sustainability planning. Without these elements, even strategically important projects may struggle to attract funding or reach implementation stages.

The discussion further emphasized the importance of aligning infrastructure development with **international standards and best practices**, particularly those related to environmental sustainability, procurement transparency, and financial accountability. This alignment was presented as essential for building investor confidence and ensuring long-term project viability.

A major focus of the session was the transition toward **sustainable and circular infrastructure models**. Speakers explored how cities across the Western Balkans can modernize their infrastructure systems by integrating energy-efficient solutions, circular economy principles, and environmentally responsible construction practices. This includes reducing resource consumption, minimizing waste generation, optimizing material use, and incorporating renewable energy systems into urban infrastructure networks.

Participants discussed how circular infrastructure approaches can significantly improve both environmental performance and economic efficiency. By extending the lifecycle of materials, reducing operational costs, and enhancing resource productivity, circular models offer a pathway toward more resilient and sustainable urban development. These approaches also align closely with European Union sustainability frameworks and climate neutrality goals.

The session also addressed the growing importance of **mobility and tourism infrastructure** in shaping regional competitiveness. Speakers emphasized that transport systems, connectivity networks, and urban mobility solutions play a crucial role in determining how attractive cities and destinations are for both visitors and investors. Efficient airports, highways, public transport systems, and smart mobility solutions were identified as key enablers of tourism growth and regional integration.

Participants explored how improved mobility infrastructure can directly contribute to increased tourism flows, longer visitor stays, and more balanced distribution of economic benefits across regions. In particular, better connectivity between urban centers, rural areas, and tourism destinations was highlighted as a key factor in unlocking the full potential of the Western Balkans as a multi-destination tourism region.

Another important dimension of the discussion was the role of **energy infrastructure within urban development systems**. Speakers highlighted the importance of integrating renewable energy sources, smart grids, and energy-efficient technologies into urban planning frameworks. This integration was presented as essential for reducing carbon emissions, improving energy security, and supporting long-term sustainability goals.

Workforce development and **skills readiness** emerged as a critical cross-cutting theme throughout the session. Panelists emphasized that successful infrastructure transformation depends not only on financial investment and technical planning but also on the availability of skilled professionals capable of designing, implementing, operating, and maintaining modern infrastructure systems.

The discussion highlighted a growing skills gap in areas such as engineering, construction technology, energy systems, transport planning, and digital infrastructure management. Strengthening technical and vocational education and training (TVET) systems was identified as a strategic priority for ensuring that the region can effectively deliver complex infrastructure projects in line with international standards.

Participants learned that investment in human capital is just as important as investment in physical infrastructure. Without a skilled workforce, even well-financed projects may face delays, inefficiencies, or quality limitations. As a result, workforce development was positioned as a foundational element of long-term infrastructure success.

The session also emphasized the importance of **international cooperation and cross-border collaboration** in infrastructure development. Speakers noted that infrastructure systems in the Western Balkans are inherently interconnected, and that regional coordination is essential for maximizing efficiency and impact. Cross-border transport corridors, shared energy systems, and coordinated urban development strategies were identified as key areas for collaboration.

International financial institutions, European organizations, regional chambers of commerce, and private sector stakeholders were recognized as critical partners in supporting infrastructure development across the region. Their involvement helps ensure access to financing, technical expertise, and best practice models, while also reducing investment risk and improving project quality.

The panel was moderated by **Anette Groschupp**, Deputy Managing Director of the Chamber of the Stuttgart Region, who guided an in-depth and solution-oriented discussion with a distinguished group of experts:

- **Filipe Ortigão Guimarães** - Co-Founder, Between Galaxies
- **Ilir Basha** - Associate Director, Senior Banker, Infrastructure Europe, EBRD
- **Christian Binnig** - TVET Expert, Training Academy, Chamber of Crafts Stuttgart
- **Besnik Vasolli** - Director, Kosovar-German Economic Chamber

Each panelist contributed valuable perspectives from their respective fields, including infrastructure financing, regional cooperation, skills development, and private sector engagement. Their contributions provided participants with a comprehensive understanding of how infrastructure ecosystems function across different institutional and market contexts.

Throughout the discussion, speakers shared practical insights into **financing models, infrastructure planning methodologies, sustainability integration strategies, and the importance of aligning regional projects with global development standards**. These insights helped bridge the gap between strategic planning and implementation realities, offering participants concrete examples of how successful infrastructure projects are structured and delivered.

A recurring message throughout the session was that **modern infrastructure is a foundational driver of economic competitiveness, tourism growth, and sustainable urban development**. Cities and regions that invest strategically in integrated infrastructure systems are better positioned to attract investment, support business activity, improve quality of life, and enhance their international competitiveness.

The discussion also reinforced the idea that infrastructure development must be viewed as a long-term, coordinated process rather than a series of isolated projects. Success depends on consistent planning, institutional capacity, stakeholder collaboration, and alignment between public and private sector priorities.

For policymakers and public institutions, the session provided important insights into the need for strategic infrastructure planning, improved project preparation systems, and stronger alignment with international financing requirements. For investors and development institutions, it highlighted the significant opportunities available in the region, particularly in projects that demonstrate strong governance, sustainability integration, and long-term economic impact potential.

For private sector stakeholders, the discussion underscored the importance of engaging early in project development processes, contributing technical expertise, and participating in public-private partnership frameworks that enable more effective infrastructure delivery.

By the conclusion of the session, participants had gained a deeper understanding of the complex interconnections between infrastructure, mobility, energy, tourism, and regional development. The discussion demonstrated that infrastructure is not only a technical necessity but also a strategic instrument for shaping economic futures and enhancing regional integration.

As part of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, this session reinforced the festival’s broader mission of transforming dialogue into actionable cooperation. It illustrated how international collaboration, when combined with strong institutional frameworks and skilled expertise, can translate vision into tangible development outcomes for cities and regions across the Western Balkans.

Ultimately, the session delivered a clear and unifying conclusion: **the future of urban and tourism development in the Western Balkans will be defined by the quality, connectivity, sustainability, and strategic coherence of its infrastructure systems — and by the region’s ability to turn infrastructure investment into long-term economic and social transformation.**

Trust in Digital Finance



At **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, the Mainstage session titled “**Trust in Digital Finance & the Digital Economy**” delivered one of the most strategically significant discussions of the festival, bringing together influential leaders from banking, fintech, digital identity systems, payments infrastructure, regulatory institutions, and international development finance. Held on **22 May 2026 at the Piramida in Tirana**, the session focused on a foundational concept that underpins every successful digital transformation: **trust**.

In an era where financial services are rapidly evolving through digital channels, mobile platforms, and integrated online ecosystems, the discussion explored how trust, security, and regulatory confidence are becoming the core enablers of digital economic growth across Albania and the wider Western Balkans. Speakers emphasized that without trust, even the most advanced digital systems fail

to achieve adoption at scale, while with trust, even emerging ecosystems can rapidly accelerate innovation, inclusion, and competitiveness.

From the outset, the session positioned trust not as an abstract concept, but as a **critical infrastructure layer of the digital economy**. Unlike traditional financial systems where trust is often built through physical presence and institutional history, digital finance requires trust to be embedded into systems, technologies, processes, and regulations. This shift represents one of the most fundamental transformations in modern economic systems.

The discussion focused on the accelerating expansion of **digital financial services** across the region, including mobile banking, digital wallets, instant payment systems, fintech platforms, and cross-border digital transactions. While these innovations are expanding access and efficiency, they also introduce new challenges related to cybersecurity, fraud prevention, data protection, identity verification, and regulatory harmonization.

A central theme of the session was the importance of **secure digital identity systems** as the backbone of modern digital economies. Panelists emphasized that reliable digital identity frameworks are essential for enabling financial inclusion, supporting e-commerce growth, improving public service delivery, and facilitating cross-border economic activity. Without trusted identity verification systems, digital ecosystems remain fragmented, inefficient, and vulnerable to risk.

Participants explored how technologies such as electronic identification, biometric authentication, secure login systems, and digital signatures are reshaping how individuals and businesses interact with financial institutions. These tools are increasingly seen as essential components of modern infrastructure, enabling faster onboarding, reducing operational costs, and improving customer experience while maintaining high security standards.

Another key insight from the discussion was that **trust extends far beyond banking systems alone**. Speakers highlighted that digital trust is now a cross-sectoral requirement affecting e-commerce platforms, digital government services, telecommunications systems, logistics networks, and cross-border business transactions. As economies become more interconnected and digitized, trust becomes a shared foundation across all sectors.

The conversation also addressed the rapid **transformation of traditional banking systems in Southeast Europe**. Financial institutions are undergoing significant structural changes as they adapt to new consumer expectations, increasing digitalization, and competition from agile fintech companies. This transformation is not simply technological but organizational, cultural, and regulatory in nature.

Panelists emphasized that banks are no longer only financial intermediaries but are becoming **digital service platforms** that integrate payments, data analytics, customer experience management, and ecosystem partnerships. This shift requires new skill sets, new operational models, and new forms of collaboration between banks, fintech companies, regulators, and technology providers.

A recurring theme throughout the session was the importance of **collaboration between traditional financial institutions and fintech innovators**. Rather than competing in isolation, these actors

increasingly operate within shared ecosystems where innovation is driven by partnership. Banks provide stability, regulatory compliance, and customer trust, while fintech companies contribute agility, technological innovation, and user-centric design.

The discussion highlighted that successful digital finance ecosystems are built on **cooperation rather than fragmentation**, where multiple stakeholders work together to deliver seamless, secure, and efficient financial services. This collaborative approach was identified as essential for scaling innovation and ensuring system-wide resilience.

Regulation and governance were also central to the conversation. Speakers underlined that **regulatory clarity and institutional trust are critical enablers of digital finance adoption**. While innovation drives opportunity, it must operate within clear frameworks that ensure consumer protection, data security, anti-money laundering compliance, and financial stability.

Participants learned that effective regulation does not hinder innovation but rather creates the conditions for sustainable growth. Predictable regulatory environments help reduce uncertainty for investors and businesses, enabling them to scale digital solutions with confidence. Conversely, fragmented or unclear regulatory systems can slow down innovation and reduce market competitiveness.

The panel also explored the increasing importance of **cybersecurity and data protection** in digital financial ecosystems. As financial services become more digitized, the risks associated with cyber threats, data breaches, and digital fraud increase significantly. Speakers emphasized that building secure systems is not optional but fundamental to maintaining public confidence and system integrity.

Participants were introduced to the concept of “**security by design**”, where digital systems are developed with integrated security features from the outset rather than as afterthoughts. This approach ensures that trust is embedded into the architecture of digital financial services rather than layered on top of existing systems.

Another important topic was the role of **financial inclusion in the digital economy**. Speakers highlighted that digital financial services have the potential to significantly expand access to banking and financial tools, particularly for underserved populations, small businesses, and rural communities. By reducing barriers to entry and simplifying access processes, digital finance can play a transformative role in economic inclusion.

The discussion emphasized that financial inclusion is not only a social objective but also an economic driver, enabling broader participation in economic activity, increasing consumer spending capacity, and supporting entrepreneurship development.

The session was moderated by **Jon Jetullahu, CEO of IT Vision**, who guided a highly interactive and insightful discussion with a distinguished group of regional and international experts:

- **Georgi Dimitrov** - President of the Board of Directors and Co-Founder, Evrotrust Technologies
- **Eneida Thomaj** - Managing Director, PayLink Albania

- **Ledia Bregu** - Director of Payment Systems, Accounting and Finance Department, Bank of Albania
- **Fortesa Jakupi** - Head of Business Support and Digital Channels Department, ProCredit Bank Albania
- **Agron Gashi** - CEO, KREI
- **Anjeza Hobdari** - Associate Director / Senior Banker FI WB & EE, EBRD

Each speaker contributed valuable insights from their respective domains, including digital identity systems, payment infrastructure, banking transformation, fintech innovation, regulatory frameworks, and international financial development. Their combined perspectives offered participants a comprehensive understanding of how digital finance ecosystems are evolving across the region and globally.

Throughout the session, speakers shared practical examples of **digital transformation in financial services**, including improvements in onboarding processes, automation of compliance procedures, expansion of digital payment systems, and integration of cross-border financial solutions. These examples illustrated how theory is increasingly being translated into real-world implementation across the Western Balkans.

A key takeaway for participants was that **trust is not a by-product of digital finance—it is its foundation**. Without trust, digital systems cannot scale, and without secure, transparent, and user-centric design, trust cannot be established. As a result, trust must be actively designed, maintained, and continuously reinforced through technology, governance, and institutional cooperation.

The discussion also reinforced the idea that **the digital economy is fundamentally reshaping competitiveness**. Countries and regions that successfully build trusted digital ecosystems are better positioned to attract investment, support innovation, and integrate into global economic networks. Conversely, regions that fail to establish digital trust frameworks risk falling behind in an increasingly interconnected global economy.

For policymakers and regulators, the session provided insights into the importance of developing balanced frameworks that encourage innovation while ensuring stability and consumer protection. For financial institutions, it highlighted the need for continuous digital transformation and ecosystem collaboration. For fintech companies, it reinforced the importance of compliance, interoperability, and user trust. For investors, it demonstrated the significant growth potential of digital finance in emerging markets.

By the conclusion of the session, participants had gained a deeper understanding of how digital finance ecosystems are built, how trust is established, and how innovation can be scaled responsibly. The discussion provided both strategic perspectives and practical lessons for advancing digital transformation across financial systems in the region.

As part of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, this session reinforced the festival's broader mission of connecting innovation, policy, and investment communities around shared challenges and opportunities. It demonstrated that the future of the digital economy in the Western Balkans will

depend not only on technological advancement, but on the ability to build **secure, transparent, and trusted financial ecosystems** that support inclusive growth and long-term competitiveness.

Ultimately, the session delivered a clear and unifying message: **trust is the invisible infrastructure of the digital economy—and the regions that invest in it most effectively will lead the next wave of global financial and economic transformation.**

Fintech & Open Banking in SEE



As part of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, the session “**Fintech & Open Banking in Southeast Europe**” brought together some of the most influential voices from the region’s rapidly evolving digital finance ecosystem to explore how innovation, regulation, and cross-sector collaboration are fundamentally reshaping financial services across Southeast Europe. Held on **22 May 2026 at the Piramida in Tirana**, the session provided a high-level platform for dialogue between fintech executives, digital banking leaders, payments infrastructure providers, lending innovators, and embedded finance specialists, all united by a shared objective: accelerating the region’s transition toward a more connected, inclusive, and technology-driven financial system.

From the outset, the discussion framed Southeast Europe as a region in the midst of a significant financial transformation. Speakers emphasized that the traditional boundaries between banking institutions, fintech companies, and technology providers are rapidly dissolving, giving rise to a more integrated and collaborative ecosystem. In this new environment, **open banking, digital payments, and data-driven financial services** are becoming central pillars of economic development, enabling faster transactions, improved customer experiences, and broader access to financial products.

A key theme of the session was the growing importance of **financial interoperability** across institutions and borders. Panelists highlighted that as consumers and businesses increasingly demand seamless digital experiences, financial systems must evolve to allow secure data exchange and service integration between banks and fintech platforms. This shift toward interoperability is not only a technological upgrade but also a structural transformation that requires regulatory alignment, standardization of APIs, and shared trust frameworks between stakeholders.

The discussion further explored the emergence and expansion of **open banking frameworks** across Southeast Europe. Speakers emphasized that open banking represents one of the most transformative developments in modern finance, enabling customers to securely share financial data with authorized third-party providers in order to access more personalized, efficient, and competitive financial services. Participants noted that while adoption is still at different stages across the region, the direction of travel is clear: financial systems are moving toward openness, connectivity, and user empowerment.

However, the panel also stressed that the success of open banking depends heavily on **trust, regulation, and institutional cooperation**. Without clear regulatory frameworks and strong governance structures, the benefits of open banking cannot be fully realized. Speakers underlined the importance of collaboration between central banks, financial regulators, commercial banks, fintech startups, and technology infrastructure providers to ensure that innovation develops within a secure and stable environment.

Another major focus of the session was the rapid evolution of **digital payments infrastructure**. Participants discussed how changing consumer behavior is driving significant demand for faster, more secure, and more accessible payment solutions. From mobile wallets and instant payment systems to QR-based transactions and cross-border digital transfers, the payments landscape in Southeast Europe is undergoing a profound transformation.

Speakers emphasized that modern payment systems must balance three critical dimensions: **speed, security, and accessibility**. While speed and convenience are essential for user adoption, they must be supported by robust cybersecurity measures, fraud prevention systems, and regulatory compliance mechanisms. At the same time, accessibility remains a key concern, particularly in ensuring that SMEs, rural communities, and underserved populations are not excluded from digital financial services.

The conversation also highlighted the importance of **financial literacy and digital awareness** as foundational elements of a successful fintech ecosystem. Panelists noted that technology alone is not sufficient to drive inclusion; users must also understand how to safely and effectively use digital financial tools. As a result, education and awareness campaigns were identified as essential components of long-term ecosystem development.

A particularly important segment of the discussion focused on **financial inclusion and lending innovation**. Speakers explored how fintech platforms are expanding access to credit through alternative data models, automated credit scoring systems, and embedded lending solutions. These innovations are helping to overcome traditional barriers in access to finance, particularly for individuals, micro-enterprises, and SMEs that may lack extensive credit histories or collateral.

Participants learned that **digital lending platforms are fundamentally reshaping credit markets** by making financing more accessible, faster, and more tailored to individual needs. By leveraging technology, these platforms can assess risk more efficiently and provide financing solutions that were previously unavailable through conventional banking systems.

The panel also discussed the rise of **embedded finance**, where financial services are integrated directly into non-financial platforms such as e-commerce systems, business software, and digital marketplaces. This trend is transforming the way financial services are delivered, shifting them from standalone products to seamlessly embedded components of broader digital ecosystems.

Throughout the session, speakers emphasized that these innovations are not occurring in isolation but are part of a broader regional shift toward **digital economic integration**. Southeast Europe is increasingly positioned as a dynamic environment for fintech development, driven by entrepreneurial energy, growing investor interest, and accelerating digital adoption across both public and private sectors.

The session was moderated by **Arsim Bruçaj, Chairman of the Board at Virtus Lending LLC**, who guided a highly interactive and forward-looking discussion with a distinguished panel of regional fintech leaders:

- **Albana Pelinku** - CEO, NOA Financojmë Kosovë
- **Deivis Shomo** - Chief Commercial Officer, EasyPay
- **Yll Dushi** - CEO, OneFor Kosovo
- **Jonida Çela** - CEO, IutePay EMI

Each panelist contributed valuable insights drawn from their experience in digital lending, payment services, fintech infrastructure, and electronic money institutions. Their perspectives provided participants with a comprehensive understanding of how fintech ecosystems are evolving in practice, not just in theory.

A recurring message throughout the discussion was that **Southeast Europe is no longer a passive observer of global fintech trends but is actively shaping its own digital financial future**. While challenges remain in terms of regulation, infrastructure, and market fragmentation, the region is demonstrating strong momentum toward innovation-driven financial transformation.

The exchange of ideas also highlighted the importance of **cross-border collaboration within the fintech sector**. Speakers emphasized that financial services are inherently transnational, and that cooperation between markets can accelerate innovation, improve scalability, and attract greater investment into the region. Harmonization of regulatory approaches and interoperability between payment systems were identified as key enablers of regional financial integration.

For policymakers and regulators, the session provided insights into the need for adaptive regulatory frameworks that encourage innovation while safeguarding stability and consumer protection. For financial institutions, it underscored the importance of digital transformation and partnership with fintech companies. For fintech entrepreneurs, it highlighted the opportunities available in emerging

markets and the importance of building scalable, compliant, and user-centric solutions. For investors, it demonstrated the strong growth potential of Southeast Europe’s digital finance sector.

By the conclusion of the session, participants had developed a deeper understanding of how fintech innovation, open banking, and digital payments are converging to reshape the financial landscape of the region. The discussion reinforced the idea that the future of finance in Southeast Europe will be defined by **connectivity, collaboration, and customer-centric innovation**.

As part of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, this session further strengthened the festival’s role as a regional platform for knowledge exchange and ecosystem building. It demonstrated how dialogue between industry leaders, institutions, and innovators can translate into practical insights that support the development of more inclusive, efficient, and competitive financial systems.

Ultimately, the session delivered a clear and unified message: **the next phase of financial transformation in Southeast Europe will be driven by open systems, trusted collaboration, and innovative fintech solutions that break down barriers and create new opportunities for economic growth across the region.**

SaaS & Digital Export



One of the most forward-looking Mainstage discussions at **BALKONNECT Festival 2026** was the session “**SaaS & Digital Export from the Western Balkans**”, a strategic and in-depth conversation dedicated to the rapidly evolving role of the region within the global digital economy. Held on **22**

May 2026 at the Piramida in Tirana, the session gathered founders, technology executives, cybersecurity experts, product leaders, and ecosystem builders to explore how companies from the Western Balkans can successfully scale beyond regional boundaries, export high-value digital services, and position themselves as credible competitors in the global technology landscape.

From the beginning, the discussion framed the Western Balkans as a region undergoing a **structural transformation in its technology identity**. Traditionally recognized for outsourcing services, nearshore development, and technical execution capacity, the region is now increasingly shifting toward the creation of **independent, product-driven technology companies** capable of building and scaling Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) platforms for global markets. This transformation was presented not as a gradual evolution, but as a defining economic shift that will shape the region's competitiveness over the next decade.

Speakers emphasized that this transition from outsourcing to product ownership requires more than technical capability. While the Western Balkans already benefits from a strong pool of engineering talent, competitive development costs, and growing startup ecosystems, the next phase of growth depends on the development of **product thinking, strategic positioning, international market awareness, and customer-centric innovation models**. In this context, companies are increasingly expected to move beyond execution-based services and toward building scalable digital products with global relevance.

A central theme of the session was the rapid expansion and global relevance of the **Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) model**, which is fundamentally reshaping how software companies are structured, funded, and scaled. Panelists highlighted that SaaS enables companies to deliver value globally without geographical limitations, leveraging cloud infrastructure, subscription-based revenue models, and continuous product iteration. For companies in the Western Balkans, this model represents a unique opportunity to bypass traditional market constraints and directly access international customers from the earliest stages of growth.

The discussion further explored how SaaS businesses are particularly well-suited to the region due to its combination of technical expertise, entrepreneurial agility, and increasing exposure to international markets. However, speakers also stressed that success in SaaS requires a deep understanding of **global customer behavior, pricing models, distribution channels, and product-market fit dynamics**, which often differ significantly from regional market expectations.

A major focus of the session was **digital export readiness**, a concept that was repeatedly identified as essential for the long-term success of technology companies in the region. Digital export readiness refers to the ability of a company to operate, scale, and compete effectively in international markets while maintaining compliance, operational efficiency, and product quality at global standards.

Panelists explained that this readiness includes multiple dimensions, such as:

- scalable cloud infrastructure capable of supporting international user bases
- robust cybersecurity frameworks aligned with global standards
- compliance with data protection regulations such as GDPR and beyond
- multilingual product design and localization strategies

- international sales and go-to-market capabilities
- customer support systems operating across time zones

Participants emphasized that while many companies in the region demonstrate strong technical foundations, fewer are fully prepared for the complexity of global market operations. Bridging this gap was identified as one of the most important strategic priorities for ecosystem development.

Another key topic was the importance of **cybersecurity and digital trust as foundational pillars of SaaS growth**. As companies expand into international markets, trust becomes a decisive factor in customer acquisition, retention, and scalability. Speakers highlighted that cybersecurity is no longer a back-end technical function but a core business requirement that directly influences brand reputation and market competitiveness.

The discussion also addressed the increasing importance of **regulatory alignment and cross-border compliance**, particularly as companies operate across multiple jurisdictions with varying legal and data protection requirements. In this context, regulatory awareness was presented as a strategic advantage rather than a constraint, enabling companies to expand more efficiently and avoid costly operational risks.

The session further explored the evolving **startup ecosystem in the Western Balkans**, highlighting both progress and structural challenges. Speakers noted that the region has seen a significant rise in startup formation, accelerator programs, and early-stage investment activity over recent years. However, challenges remain in scaling companies beyond early traction and enabling them to access larger international funding rounds, enterprise clients, and global distribution channels.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the need for stronger **ecosystem integration and collaboration**, including deeper cooperation between founders, venture capital investors, angel networks, universities, government institutions, and international development organizations. Speakers emphasized that no single stakeholder can drive digital transformation alone; instead, sustained ecosystem success depends on coordinated action across multiple layers of support.

Education and talent development were also highlighted as critical enablers of long-term SaaS growth. Beyond technical engineering skills, participants emphasized the need for capabilities in **product management, UX/UI design, growth strategy, data analytics, cybersecurity, and digital marketing**. Developing professionals who understand both technology and business was identified as essential for building globally competitive companies.

The conversation also addressed **international market expansion strategies**, particularly how companies from the Western Balkans can successfully enter and compete in mature markets such as the European Union, North America, and the Middle East. Speakers shared insights on the importance of building strong distribution partnerships, adapting pricing models to local market conditions, investing in brand development, and establishing credibility through certifications and security standards.

Throughout the session, panelists shared concrete experiences from their own journeys in scaling technology companies, building SaaS platforms, developing cybersecurity solutions, and expanding

into international markets. These real-world perspectives helped translate strategic concepts into practical insights, offering participants a clearer understanding of both the opportunities and challenges involved in global expansion.

The session was moderated by **Leonora Kusari, Principal and Regional Coordinator BIP, SME F&D at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)**, who guided a dynamic and highly interactive dialogue with an accomplished group of technology and innovation leaders:

- **Umesh Perera** - CEO & Founder, AYOZAT
- **Anri Bundo** - CEO, Algorhythm
- **Bujar Bakiu** - Managing Director, Data Max
- **Rubin Haxhiymeri** - Head of Growth and Products, DigitSapiens
- **Arbër Kadia** - CEO & Co-Founder, Patoko
- **Nikolin Ngjela** - Co-Founder & CTO, LekoTech
- **Bujar Ibrahim** - CEO, TESSA Security

Each speaker contributed valuable perspectives from different segments of the digital economy, including SaaS development, cybersecurity, product growth, infrastructure scaling, and digital entrepreneurship. Their combined insights provided a comprehensive overview of how technology companies in the region are evolving and positioning themselves for global competition.

A key takeaway from the discussion was that the Western Balkans is no longer defined solely by its role as a service provider in global IT outsourcing chains. Instead, it is increasingly emerging as a **source of innovation, product development, and high-value digital entrepreneurship**, capable of contributing meaningfully to global technology markets.

Speakers emphasized that this transformation is still ongoing and requires continued investment in ecosystem development, access to growth capital, regulatory support, and international collaboration. However, the trajectory is clear: the region is steadily moving toward a more prominent and independent role in the global digital economy.

For policymakers, the session highlighted the importance of creating enabling environments that support innovation, improve digital infrastructure, and facilitate cross-border digital trade. For investors, it demonstrated the growing potential of the Western Balkans as an emerging SaaS and digital export hub. For founders and entrepreneurs, it provided strategic guidance on how to build scalable, globally competitive companies from the region. For ecosystem organizations, it reinforced the importance of coordination, capacity building, and international integration.

By the conclusion of the session, participants had gained a deep and multidimensional understanding of what it takes to build and scale SaaS companies from the Western Balkans to global markets. The discussion reinforced that success in the digital economy is no longer determined solely by technical execution, but by the ability to combine **product excellence, strategic vision, global mindset, and ecosystem collaboration**.

As part of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, this session further strengthened the festival's role as a regional platform for innovation dialogue and digital ecosystem development. It demonstrated how the Western Balkans is increasingly positioning itself as a rising contributor to the global SaaS economy, with the potential to move from regional service delivery to international product leadership.

Ultimately, the session delivered a clear and powerful message: **the future of digital growth in the Western Balkans will be defined by its ability to build globally scalable products, strengthen digital export capabilities, and transform technical talent into internationally competitive innovation leadership.**

ESG Masterclass: From Compliance to Competitive Advantage



The **ESG Masterclass at BALKONNECT Festival 2026 in Tirana** introduced a highly focused and practical dimension to the broader festival program, addressing one of the most rapidly evolving priorities in today's global economy: the integration of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles into core business strategy. The session highlighted from the outset that ESG is no longer a secondary or purely reporting-oriented requirement, but a fundamental framework that increasingly shapes how companies operate, access finance, engage with stakeholders, and compete in international markets.

Led by **Maria Tsiadi, ESG Consultant at Impacta ESG Consulting**, the masterclass was designed to bridge the gap between theory and implementation. Rather than limiting the discussion to conceptual definitions or regulatory frameworks, the session focused on how ESG principles are translated into day-to-day business operations, internal governance structures, and measurable performance systems. Participants were guided through a practical understanding of how organizations can embed ESG considerations into strategic planning, risk management, and long-term value creation.

A central theme of the discussion was the transformation of ESG from a **compliance requirement into a strategic business advantage**. Speakers emphasized that companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), often initially perceive ESG as an administrative burden or external obligation. However, the session reframed ESG as a powerful enabler of competitiveness, innovation, and market access. Organizations that adopt ESG principles proactively were shown to be increasingly better positioned to attract investment, secure financing, and integrate into global value chains.

The discussion highlighted that ESG is becoming a key differentiator in both regional and international business environments. Companies that demonstrate strong environmental responsibility, social impact awareness, and transparent governance structures are more likely to build trust with investors, customers, and institutional partners. This trust, in turn, translates into improved access to capital, stronger brand reputation, and enhanced resilience in times of economic uncertainty.

A significant portion of the masterclass was dedicated to the **evolving role of financial institutions and investors in driving ESG adoption**. Participants examined how banks, development finance institutions, and private investors are increasingly embedding ESG criteria into their decision-making frameworks. This shift is fundamentally changing how investment opportunities are evaluated, how risk is assessed, and how long-term partnerships are structured.

Speakers emphasized that ESG is now a core component of investment readiness. Projects and businesses that fail to meet minimum ESG standards are increasingly excluded from financing opportunities, while those that demonstrate strong ESG alignment gain a competitive advantage in accessing both public and private capital. This dynamic is particularly relevant for emerging economies and transition markets, where alignment with international investment standards is essential for attracting sustainable funding.

The masterclass also provided a detailed exploration of the **practical implementation of ESG frameworks within organizations**. Rather than presenting ESG as a rigid or one-size-fits-all model, the discussion emphasized its adaptability to different sectors, company sizes, and operational contexts. Participants were guided through key steps in building an ESG strategy, including identifying material sustainability issues, defining relevant key performance indicators (KPIs), establishing internal reporting mechanisms, and developing governance structures that ensure accountability and transparency.

Particular attention was given to the importance of **data collection and measurement systems**, which are essential for credible ESG reporting. Speakers highlighted that without reliable data and

consistent tracking mechanisms, ESG commitments risk remaining declarative rather than operational. As a result, organizations were encouraged to invest in systems that allow them to monitor environmental impact, social outcomes, and governance practices in a structured and verifiable manner.

Another important dimension of the discussion was the role of ESG in **supply chain integration and international market access**. As global companies increasingly require their suppliers and partners to comply with ESG standards, smaller businesses are now expected to align with these requirements in order to remain competitive. This creates both a challenge and an opportunity: while compliance demands additional effort, it also opens doors to participation in larger and more stable international value chains.

The session also emphasized the importance of **capacity building and knowledge transfer**, particularly for SMEs and organizations in developing markets. Participants noted that one of the key barriers to ESG adoption is not resistance, but lack of awareness, technical expertise, and practical guidance. In this context, training programs, workshops, and ecosystem support initiatives were identified as essential tools for accelerating ESG integration across different sectors.

The discussion further explored the broader implications of ESG for **long-term business resilience and sustainability**. Speakers highlighted that companies integrating ESG principles tend to be better prepared for regulatory changes, environmental risks, social expectations, and market volatility. ESG was therefore presented not only as a compliance framework but as a strategic risk management tool that strengthens organizational stability over time.

For SMEs in particular, the masterclass underscored the importance of viewing ESG as a **growth enabler rather than a constraint**. By embedding sustainability principles into their operations early, smaller companies can position themselves more effectively for scaling, investment attraction, and international expansion. This proactive approach allows them to avoid costly adjustments later and build stronger foundations for long-term success.

By the conclusion of the session, the overarching message was clear and consistently reinforced: **ESG is becoming a defining element of modern business competitiveness**. It directly influences access to finance, market positioning, stakeholder trust, and long-term value creation. Organizations that understand and integrate ESG principles early are not only better prepared for evolving regulatory landscapes but also significantly more competitive in an increasingly interconnected and sustainability-driven global economy.

Within the broader context of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, the ESG Masterclass reinforced the festival's central narrative of transformation and convergence. It demonstrated how sustainability, innovation, and investment readiness are becoming deeply interconnected forces shaping the future of regional economic development.

Ultimately, the session delivered a strong and practical conclusion: **ESG is no longer optional—it is a strategic foundation for business survival, growth, and global competitiveness in the next phase of economic evolution.**

Pitching Event

BALKONNECT FESTIVAL 2026 PITCHING APPLICATIONS COUNTRY BREAKDOWN

A total of 24 startups and innovative companies from across the region applied to pitch at the Balkonnect Festival 2026 Pitching Event.

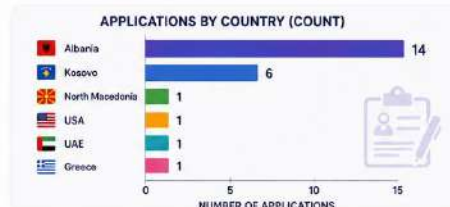
24
TOTAL
APPLICATIONS

6
COUNTRIES
REPRESENTED

21
FROM THE
WESTERN BALKANS

3
FROM OUTSIDE
THE REGION

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS	PERCENTAGE
Albania	14	58.33%
Kosovo	6	25.00%
North Macedonia	1	4.17%
USA	1	4.17%
UAE	1	4.17%
Greece	1	4.17%
TOTAL	24	100%



KEY TAKEAWAY

Albania leads with the highest number of applications (58.33%), followed by Kosovo (25.00%). The event attracted interest from 6 countries in total, showing strong regional and international engagement.

On **22 May 2026 at 17:00**, within the framework of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, a dedicated **Pitching Event** was successfully organized at the iconic **Piramida in Tirana**, in partnership with **Keiretsu Forum Southeast Europe** and with the support of **Prishtina REA**. The event represented one of the most dynamic and investment-focused moments of the festival program, bringing together startups, SMEs, founders, angel investors, venture capital representatives, ecosystem builders, and international business stakeholders in a structured environment dedicated to innovation, entrepreneurship, and cross-border investment cooperation.

The pitching session was designed as a high-impact platform to directly connect promising startups from the Western Balkans with international investor networks, while simultaneously strengthening the regional startup ecosystem under the guiding vision of **“Business Without Borders.”** It served not only as a showcase of entrepreneurial talent, but also as a practical investment matchmaking mechanism aimed at converting innovation into funding, mentorship, and strategic growth partnerships.

Prior to the event, an **international open call for applications** was launched through the official communication channels of BALKONNECT Festival 2026 and its partner organizations. The call attracted strong interest from across the region, targeting startups, early-stage companies, scalable SMEs, and founders seeking investment, strategic partnerships, and international expansion opportunities. The response reflected the growing momentum of the regional startup ecosystem and the increasing appetite for structured access to capital and investor networks.

In total, the pitching call received **24 applications** from startups and companies operating across a wide range of industries, including:

- Artificial Intelligence (AI)
- GreenTech and Clean Energy Solutions
- HealthTech and Digital Health Services
- FinTech and Digital Payments
- Legal-Tech Solutions
- Tourism Technology
- Logistics and Supply Chain Innovation
- SaaS Platforms and Cloud Solutions
- Digital Services and IT Products
- E-commerce and Marketplaces
- PropTech and Smart Real Estate Solutions
- Business Automation and Enterprise Tools

This diversity of sectors highlighted the increasing sophistication of the Western Balkans startup landscape, demonstrating that innovation is no longer concentrated in a single domain, but is instead expanding across multiple high-growth industries.

All applications were jointly evaluated by **Keiretsu Forum Southeast Europe** and **Prishtina REA**, through a structured selection process based on internationally recognized investment criteria. The evaluation framework focused on:

- Level of innovation and uniqueness of the solution
- Market scalability and regional/global growth potential
- Existing traction and early adoption indicators
- Business model strength and sustainability
- Investment readiness and funding compatibility
- Team capacity, execution ability, and leadership quality
- Long-term regional and international expansion potential

Following a competitive review process, **five startups were selected** to present their solutions live during the official Pitching Event at BALKONNECT Festival 2026.

Selected Pitching Startups:

Startup / App	Description	Key Highlights
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EU Presence	Platform supporting businesses and organizations in building visibility and operational readiness for EU markets	Early-stage initiative focused on EU integration support, strategic positioning, and cross-border business facilitation
The Founder Games	Startup reality-show and accelerator platform for Balkan founders	Combines media exposure, mentorship, investor access, and startup competitions in a unique hybrid format expanding across the region
Ecentic AI	Artificial intelligence and data-driven solutions company	Focused on AI-powered tools and digital transformation solutions with emerging innovation potential
Levita Med	Telemedicine platform connecting Albanian-speaking patients with doctors abroad	Provides fast online consultations with Albanian-speaking medical professionals in Europe and the U.S., strengthening diaspora healthcare access
LookUp Parking	Smart parking and urban mobility solution	Offers digital parking discovery, reservation, and smart infrastructure solutions contributing to smart city development

Each selected startup represented a different segment of the innovation ecosystem, illustrating the breadth of entrepreneurial activity in the region—from healthcare and artificial intelligence to urban mobility, media innovation, and digital infrastructure.

The pitching session was moderated by **Jon Jetullahu**, who guided the program through a structured and high-energy format that ensured each founder had the opportunity to clearly present their value proposition, business model, growth strategy, and investment needs in front of an engaged audience of investors and ecosystem stakeholders.

The investor panel included representatives from **Keiretsu Forum Southeast Europe** as well as members and affiliates of the **World Business Angels Investment Forum (WBAF)**, creating a strong blend of regional and international investment expertise.

Participating Investors and Ecosystem Leaders:

1. **Ravik Mima** - Investor and Keiretsu Forum representative, active in startup ecosystem development and cross-border investment facilitation
2. **Shefqet Abdullahi** - Entrepreneurship and investment network professional with experience in startup mentoring and regional business collaboration
3. **Grant Van Cleefe** - International investor and startup mentor focused on venture building, scaling strategies, and ecosystem acceleration
4. **Drin Mulliqi** - Startup ecosystem advocate and Keiretsu Forum representative engaged in innovation support initiatives
5. **Katrina Victoria Gumaya** - WBAF Senator (Philippines), global entrepreneurship advocate promoting angel investment and innovation diplomacy
6. **Enrico Ceko** - WBAF Senator (Albania), supporting startup financing, investor engagement, and international collaboration

7. **Albina Mančka** - Entrepreneur and investor (Elite Invest), focused on business development and strategic investment facilitation

The presence of this diverse investor group ensured that startups were exposed to a wide range of perspectives, from early-stage angel investment to international scaling strategies and ecosystem development insights.

Throughout the session, startups presented their business models, market opportunities, traction levels, and long-term growth strategies. Investors engaged directly with founders through Q&A sessions, providing feedback on scalability, product-market fit, financial projections, and investment readiness.

One of the most significant outcomes of the Pitching Event was the generation of **concrete investment discussions and early-stage cooperation agreements** between startups and investors. The event successfully moved beyond theoretical networking and into actionable engagement, demonstrating the effectiveness of structured pitching formats in accelerating ecosystem development.

As part of **BALKONNECT Festival 2026**, this session highlighted the festival's core mission: transforming dialogue into deals, ideas into investment opportunities, and innovation into tangible economic growth.

Ultimately, the Pitching Event demonstrated that the Western Balkans startup ecosystem is moving into a new phase—one defined not only by ambition and talent, but by increasing **investment readiness, international connectivity, and structured pathways to scale.**

B2B Matchmaking Sessions

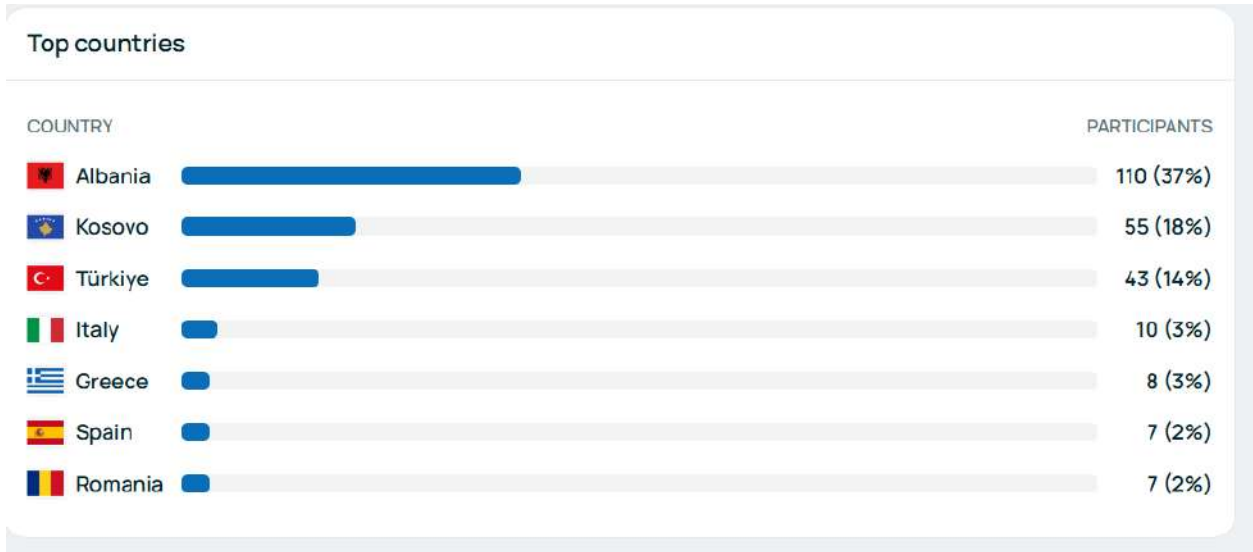


The B2B Matchmaking was conducted in a hybrid format over two days, combining onsite meetings held during the festival with virtual meetings facilitated through the B2Match platform. Participants created profiles on the platform, published their offers and partnership interests, and requested meetings based on mutual compatibility. The system automatically generated personalized agendas, enabling efficient, time-boxed 1:1 meetings aimed at fostering concrete partnerships, cross-border collaboration, and follow-up commercial discussions, ultimately leading to potential Business Partnership Agreements.

The online B2B platform also demonstrated a remarkably strong level of engagement, with a total of **309 registered participants**, out of which **299 users activated their profiles**, indicating an exceptionally high activation rate of 96.8%, which reflects both the accessibility of the platform and the strong motivation of participants to engage in structured matchmaking activities. Furthermore, **283 participants completed their matchmaking profiles**, showing that the vast majority of registered users proceeded beyond basic registration and invested in preparing meaningful business profiles, which is a critical prerequisite for effective B2B interactions.



The statistics shown in the image highlight strong engagement and international participation within the platform. A total of **299 registered participants** have joined, demonstrating a solid user base resulting at **306 meetings online**. These participants exchanged **1,621 messages**, indicating active communication and collaboration. The platform also featured **106 posted opportunities**, providing valuable resources and connections for users. Additionally, the profile received **4,586 views**, reflecting significant interest and visibility. With participants representing **38 countries**, the data showcases a diverse and global community. Overall, these statistics suggest a highly interactive, well-connected, and internationally engaged network.



Overall, these figures clearly indicate not only a high level of *user activation and profile completion*, but also a strong conversion into *meaningful matchmaking interactions*, confirming the effectiveness of the platform in facilitating structured business connectivity and international networking outcomes.

The online B2B meetings brought together participants from a wide geographical spectrum, including Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America, thereby reinforcing the initiative’s truly *international scope* and its capacity to connect diverse markets, industries, and business ecosystems within a single digital matchmaking environment.

Participants Feedback

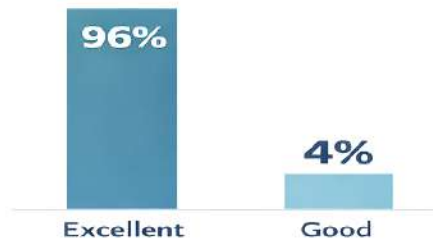
Did the event meet your expectations?



Yes

All 50 respondents (100%) answered "Yes," indicating the event met their expectations.

How would you rate *the website content* and the *information* provided?



48 respondents (96%) rated the website content and information as **Excellent**, 2 respondents (4%) rated it as **Good**.

Please rate the assistance received before and during the event.



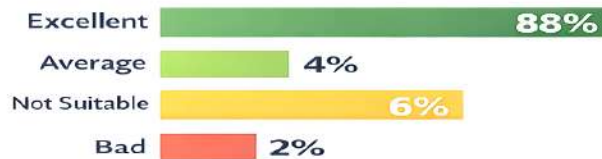
47 respondents (94%) rated the website content and information as **Excellent**, 2 respondents (4%)

Please rate the location of the event.



47 respondents (94%) rated the assistance as **Excellent**, 2 respondents (4%) rated it as **Good**, 1 respondent (2%)

Please rate the location of the event.



44 respondents (88%) rated the location as **Excellent**, 2 respondents (4%) rated it as **Average**, 3 respondents (6%) rated it as **Not Suitable**, 1 respondent (2%) rated it as **Bad**.

This section presents a detailed narrative analysis of anonymous feedback collected through the B2Match platform following BALKONNECT Festival 2026. The report combines qualitative interpretation with quantitative indicators, including numerical results, percentages, and graphical illustrations.

A total of 50 respondents participated in the anonymous feedback survey collected through the B2Match platform following BALKONNECT Festival 2026. The survey consisted of 4 evaluation questions and one additional open field for general comments and recommendations provided by participants.

The first survey question, “*Did the event meet your expectations?*”, received highly positive feedback from all 50 respondents participating in the anonymous B2Match evaluation. Every respondent answered “*Yes*,” representing a **100% positive response rate**. This result demonstrates an exceptionally high level of participant satisfaction and confirms that BALKONNECT Festival 2026 successfully fulfilled attendee expectations in terms of organisation, networking opportunities, event content, and overall experience. The unanimous positive evaluation reflects the effectiveness of the festival in delivering value to participants and establishing itself as a strong regional platform for business collaboration and professional networking.

The second survey question evaluated participant satisfaction with the website content and information provided by the organisers. The results demonstrate a very high level of satisfaction among respondents. Out of 50 participants, **48 respondents** rated the website content and communication as “*Excellent*,” representing **96%** of all responses, while **2 respondents**, or **4%**, rated it as “*Good*.” No negative evaluations were recorded. These findings indicate that participants highly appreciated the clarity, accessibility, and usefulness of the information shared before and during the event. The results also reflect the effectiveness of the organisers’ communication strategy and the successful use of the B2Match platform in supporting participant engagement, meeting scheduling, and access to event-related information throughout BALKONNECT Festival 2026.

The third survey question focused on evaluating the assistance received before and during BALKONNECT Festival 2026. The results indicate a very strong level of satisfaction with the organisational support provided to participants throughout the event process. Out of 50 respondents, **47 participants** rated the assistance as “*Excellent*,” representing **94%** of all responses. **Two respondents**, or **4%**, evaluated the assistance as “*Average*,” while only **one respondent**, representing **2%**, rated it as “*Bad*.” Overall, the findings demonstrate that participants highly appreciated the professionalism, responsiveness, and support provided by the organising team before and during the festival. The overwhelmingly positive feedback confirms the effectiveness of the coordination and communication efforts and reflects the organisers’ commitment to ensuring a smooth and well-managed participant experience.

The fourth survey question asked participants to evaluate the location of BALKONNECT Festival 2026. The feedback indicates a generally very positive perception of the event venue and its suitability for hosting a regional networking and business event. Out of 50 respondents, **44 participants** rated the location as “*Excellent*,” representing **88%** of all responses. **Two respondents**, or **4%**, evaluated the location as “*Average*,” while **three respondents**, representing **6%**, considered the location “*Not suitable*.” **One respondent**, or **2%**, rated the location as “*Bad*.” Despite a small number of less positive evaluations, the overwhelming majority of participants expressed strong satisfaction with the venue selection. The results demonstrate that the location successfully supported the festival’s networking activities, participant interaction, and overall event experience, contributing positively to the professional atmosphere of BALKONNECT Festival 2026.

The general comments provided by participants reflected an overall highly positive perception of BALKONNECT Festival 2026 and offered valuable recommendations for future editions. Several respondents praised the organisation, professionalism, and quality of the sessions, highlighting that the event was “*well organized*” and that “*sessions were organized very professionally*.” Participants also appreciated the organisers’ responsiveness and the careful selection of speakers, indicating

satisfaction with both the content and coordination of the festival. Positive remarks regarding the venue described it as “*the most suitable place*” for such an important activity, while some participants expressed their interest in attending future editions of the festival.

In addition to the positive feedback, respondents also shared constructive suggestions for improvement. Some participants recommended shorter sessions and a possible extension of the event to three days in order to create a more balanced and interactive programme. Others suggested increasing the focus on specific sectors such as manufacturing and promoting regional cultural identity, including the preservation and promotion of Albanian culture and traditional craftsmanship. Overall, the general comments demonstrate that participants valued the networking opportunities and professional environment created by BALKONNECT Festival 2026, while also providing practical recommendations that can support the further development and enhancement of future editions.

Conclusion

The **BALKONNECT Festival 2026** concluded as a highly successful and strategically significant regional platform, firmly establishing itself as one of the most important convening spaces for innovation, entrepreneurship, investment, and cross-border cooperation in Southeast Europe. Over the course of two intensive days, the festival brought together a diverse and highly relevant ecosystem of stakeholders, including policymakers, representatives of international organizations, development finance institutions, investors, startups, SMEs, innovation hubs, and business support organizations. This convergence created a uniquely dynamic environment where strategic dialogue was consistently translated into practical engagement, collaboration opportunities, and investment-oriented outcomes.

Held at the iconic **Piramida in Tirana**, the festival demonstrated not only the symbolic importance of Albania as a regional meeting point, but also the growing relevance of the Western Balkans as an interconnected economic space with shared development priorities. Throughout the program, a clear narrative emerged around regional convergence in key areas such as sustainable economic development, digital transformation, green transition, infrastructure modernization, tourism competitiveness, and private sector growth. The festival provided a structured environment where these themes were not treated in isolation, but as interconnected components of a broader regional transformation agenda.

The successful delivery of BALKONNECT Festival 2026 was made possible through strong institutional collaboration and strategic partnerships, including key contributions from organizations such as **Prishtina REA**, the **European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)**, and the **Enterprise Europe Network Kosovo**, among others. These partnerships ensured that the program was aligned with both regional development priorities and international standards of policy dialogue, investment facilitation, and innovation ecosystem development. Their involvement also reinforced the credibility and institutional depth of the festival, positioning it as a platform that bridges public policy objectives with private sector execution.

One of the most significant indicators of the festival’s success was the scale and quality of participation. With **281 onsite attendees and 299 online participants**, BALKONNECT 2026 demonstrated strong hybrid engagement and confirmed its growing reach beyond physical boundaries. The presence of **62 speakers and contributors** further underscored the international

dimension of the festival and its role as a regional gateway for global expertise, investment dialogue, and knowledge exchange. This level of participation reflects an increasing recognition of the festival as a credible and influential platform within the broader European innovation and investment landscape.

The program itself was designed to ensure both thematic depth and practical relevance. Across **7 mainstage panels, 14 thematic sessions, 3 masterclasses, and structured B2B matchmaking activities**, the festival successfully combined high-level strategic discussions with sector-specific deep dives and applied business interactions. This integrated format ensured that participants were not only exposed to policy and market insights, but were also actively engaged in discussions that led to concrete opportunities for cooperation, investment consideration, and partnership development.

A particularly important outcome of the festival was the strong level of business engagement facilitated through approximately **381 B2B meetings**, conducted both onsite and online. These structured interactions created direct channels between SMEs, investors, startups, and institutional actors, enabling targeted discussions around financing, market expansion, strategic partnerships, and innovation collaboration. This high level of engagement clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of BALKONNECT as a **transaction-oriented platform**, moving beyond traditional conference formats toward a more impact-driven ecosystem model.

In parallel, the participation of **186 SMEs** highlighted the strong demand from the private sector for platforms that offer access to knowledge, networks, and capital. The festival served as a critical bridge between emerging businesses and institutional stakeholders, enabling SMEs to better position themselves for growth, investment readiness, and internationalization. The collaboration with international investment and entrepreneurship networks, including **Keiretsu Forum Southeast Europe** and members of the **World Business Angels Investment Forum (WBAF)**, significantly strengthened the festival's investment dimension. These partnerships played a key role in connecting early-stage startups with experienced investors, mentors, and global business networks, thereby increasing the visibility and credibility of the regional startup ecosystem. This alignment between local innovation capacity and international capital networks represents a critical step in accelerating the growth of the Western Balkans innovation economy.

Beyond quantitative outcomes, BALKONNECT Festival 2026 delivered important qualitative impacts in terms of ecosystem connectivity, knowledge exchange, and regional integration. The depth of discussions across sectors such as fintech, SaaS, ESG, energy transition, tourism, infrastructure, and digital transformation reflected a maturing ecosystem increasingly capable of engaging with complex global economic trends. The festival also reinforced the importance of cross-border collaboration as a key driver of competitiveness, innovation, and sustainable development in the region.

Overall, BALKONNECT Festival 2026 successfully advanced its core mission of strengthening regional connectivity and fostering a more integrated innovation and business landscape across Southeast Europe. It functioned not only as a platform for dialogue, but as an active mechanism for ecosystem building, investment facilitation, and partnership creation. The combination of strong institutional support, high-quality participation, and measurable business outcomes confirms the festival's growing role as a **flagship regional event** with increasing international relevance.

Looking ahead, the trajectory established by the 2026 edition provides a solid foundation for further expansion and impact. Future editions are well-positioned to deepen private sector engagement, further increase international investor participation, enhance digital and hybrid capabilities, and expand structured mechanisms for post-event follow-up and long-term collaboration tracking. In doing so, BALKONNECT has the potential to evolve from a successful annual festival into a **continuous regional ecosystem platform**, actively contributing to sustainable economic growth, innovation development, and cross-border cooperation across the Western Balkans and beyond.

Ultimately, BALKONNECT Festival 2026 reaffirmed a clear and powerful conclusion: when innovation, investment, and collaboration are strategically aligned, the Western Balkans can position itself not only as a participant in global economic transformation, but as an active contributor shaping its future.