Cres Summer School 2026

A week on the beautiful Croatian island of Cres might sound like a holiday at first. Add to that inspiring young people from all over Europe, fascinating experts and in-depth discussions, and you have the Cres Summer School. In its fifth edition, held from 20 to 25 September 2026, the Cres Summer School brought together 21 young people from 15 European countries at the Palace Moise in Cres to exchange ideas, learn from one another and discuss current European challenges together.

This year's theme was 'Democracy and Security in Europe: Building Resilience in Uncertain Times'. The programme included, amongst other things, keynote speeches by experts from academia, politics and the diplomatic service. During the presentations and the subsequent Q&A sessions, participants gained valuable insights into current developments and challenges facing the EU and Europe with regard to democracy, security and EU enlargement.

Ulrike Hartmann, Special Envoy for the Western Balkans at the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria, was a guest at the event earlier that week. In her keynote, she addressed the close interconnection between enlargement and security and outlined the current state of play and challenges of the accession process. She also presented various ways in which the enlargement process could be accelerated and how candidate countries could be integrated into EU institutions and the single market even before their full accession to the EU. French diplomat Antoine Michon and his Spanish colleague Jeronimo Fuentes Candau were also guests at the Cres Summer School. Michon discussed Europe's strategic autonomy and emphasized the importance of reducing dependencies and strengthening partnerships. Fuentes Candau advocated for a stronger geopolitical role for the EU and explained how EU enlargement and a unified European voice in international organisations could contribute to this.

The philosopher Sanja Bojanić and the political scientist Cengiz Günay offered an academic perspective. Bojanić invited participants to reflect on whether the future is

open or predetermined: a fundamental distinction that can be found, for example, in the two French words for 'future' – 'l'avenir' (literally: that which is to come) and 'le futur'. This question led to an examination of the intellectual traditions that shape the worldview of some prominent AI developers. Cengiz Günay, for his part, offered insights into current developments in democracies and the trend towards autocratisation in Europe. He explained why trust in democratic processes is declining and how this is linked to the securitisation of certain policy areas.

Gordan Bosanac, a Member of the European Parliament for the Greens/European Free Alliance, and Nebojša Zelić, a member of the Rijeka City Council, both from the Croatian party Možemo!, offered a political perspective. Bosanac analysed current dynamics in the European Parliament and the role played by national affiliation and cooperation between different political groups. Zelić highlighted how a political party can emerge from civil society activism and how it manages the balancing act between civil society and political institutions.

Slađjana Ćosić, Director of the EIB Office in Croatia, and Paula Oliver Llorente, Research Assistant at the Elcano Royal Institute in Madrid, provided in-depth insights into the EU and its investment policy. Ćosić presented the work of the European Investment Bank, which plays a key role in advancing the EU's priorities and supports a wide range of projects not only within the EU but also in candidate countries and globally. For example, it plays an important role in implementing the Green Deal, supporting the EU enlargement process, and strengthening competitiveness within the EU. However, what are the EU's priorities, and how is funding allocated to address them? This was the focus of the workshop led by Oliver Llorente. In a simulation of EU budget negotiations, participants experienced first-hand how the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is negotiated, and how difficult it is to agree on a balanced budget when priorities and concerns differ.

Alongside many interesting keynotes and discussions, the Cres Summer School also featured a guided tour of the town of Cres and the Palace Moise with Andreja Malovoz, Head of the Programme Activities at the Palace Moise, University of Rijeka. Participants also had the opportunity to actively engage in a range of interactive activities. On the

topic of 'Democracy under pressure', participants from Serbia and Georgia shared their own experiences of how democracy in their countries is coming under pressure and highlighted inspiring examples of civil society engagement. Drawing on the many presentations and discussions, each participant contributed a short video statement reflecting on what Europe should stand for. At the heart of the Cres Summer School's reflections is also a joint op-ed covering the topics that became important to the participants over the course of the week. The op-ed „A Europe Worth Hoping For" argues that hope comes above all from the people who continue to stand up for democracy and freedom across Europe. Young people from the candidate countries, in particular, have shown what it means to work for democratic change despite difficult circumstances. The prospect of EU accession remains a source of hope – but only if that promise remains credible.

What remains after an intensive week are new academic insights, shared memories and friendships that will endure beyond the Cres Summer School. The beautiful surroundings of Cres played no small part in this, inviting participants to spend time together, exchange ideas and explore the area.

Author: Lisa Kirmser

The Cres Summer School 2026 was organised by the Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE, Vienna), the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip, Vienna), the Institute for Development and International Relations (IRMO, Zagreb) and the Elcano Royal Institute (Madrid). It emerged in 2022 from a Jean Monnet project and is supported, amongst others, by the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs (BMEIA), the French Embassy in Croatia, the Spanish Embassy in Croatia, the Center for Advanced Studies Southeastern Europe (CAS SEE) of the University of Rijeka, and Palace Moise.