
BALKANS CAN HELP EU 'FEEL ATTRACTIVE' AFTER BREXIT, MACEDONIA SAYS

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Dented by Brexit, the European Union should seize on the hunger of Balkan nations for membership as an opportunity to feel attractive, Macedonias foreign minister said on Wednesday (12 July).

Nikola Dimitrov was speaking on the sidelines of a summit in Trieste of six non-EU Balkan nations, which had been convened by the EU to nudge them towards greater economic integration but looked set to fall short of hopes for a full customs union.

Dimitrov told a forum of civil society organisations that Britains departure from the EU in 2019 presented Europe and the Balkans with an opportunity.

The desire of the region to join Europe is an opportunity for Europe to feel attractive, Dimitrov said.

The region and its readiness to step it up and finish the job is an opportunity for Europe to show it can make a difference and that it can think big and be self-confident.

The six countries – Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania – have been frustrated by the slow pace of EU accession. Their joining was put firmly on the backburner by some Western EU states as they grappled with crises of migration, Brexit, populism and eurozone debt.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, also attending, said the EU had a duty to move the region slowly but surely towards membership, more than 25 years after Yugoslavia unravelled in war.

Political stability in the region means political stability for us, too, Merkel said. We know this from experience.

The EU has been pushing for the creation of a common market as a way to encourage development and stability in the region, but Kosovo Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj told Reuters that his government had managed to take talk of a customs union off the table. The economy of the former Serbian province relies heavily on customs duties.

Instead, the countries will sign up to the creation of a regional economic cooperation area that would effectively plug some holes in and build on the Central European Free Trade Area, CEFTA.

Hoxhaj said that would harmonise investment law and investment policies, enhance the free movement of people and deepen digital integration.

What has been offered to us on the table is not what was presented in February 2017, Hoxhaj said, referring to the last meeting of the countries in Sarajevo, when the EU called strongly for a common market.

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