
SERBIA WON'T JOIN EU BEFORE US, ALBANIAN PM SAYS

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Serbia will not join the European Union before Albania, even though Belgrade has been designated a front-runner in the race for membership, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama said.

The European Commission has declared in recent months that it is open once again to the prospect of taking in new members from the Western Balkans. Brussels change of tone followed a period of enlargement fatigue, during which the EU was consumed with internal crises and faced a backlash in Western Europe over immigration from newer member countries in the east.

But EU officials have begun making the case that expanding into the Western Balkans will improve the blocs stability and security, by establishing EU standards of democracy and rule of law in a volatile region torn apart by war in the 1990s. The Commission has designated Serbia, the most populous country in the Western Balkans, and its smaller neighbor Montenegro as front-runners in the accession process. It has said both nations, which are already in the midst of membership negotiations, could join the EU by 2025.

Albania and Macedonia both hope to get the green light to begin membership talks of their own in the coming months. The two countries anticipate that the Commission will declare in April that they have met the conditions to get started. It will then be up to the European Council of national leaders to decide in June whether to give the go-ahead.

We strongly believe the Commission report should be positive, Rama told POLITICO during a visit to Brussels to press his countrys case. For the Council, its a fight down to the last second because we need to convince everyone that there is only one right thing to do.

Albanian diplomats say they have identified France and Germany, the EUs biggest powers, and the Netherlands, whose Prime Minister Mark Rutte has voiced skepticism about enlargement, as the countries they need to get on board to get a positive Council decision.

Although Serbia has a considerable head start, Rama predicted it would not join the EU before his country □ largely because Belgrade will have to resolve the highly sensitive issue of its relations with Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008.

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