
BELGIAN PRIME MINISTER TO ALBANIA AND SERBIA

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He will first visit Tirana, where meetings are planned with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and President Ilir Meta.

The following day, he will meet his Serbian counterpart, Ana Brnabic, the first woman to hold the post of Prime Minister in Serbia, and President Aleksandar Vucic.

Both countries face important challenges, including rule of law issues, public administration reform, security and geopolitical stability. The Western Balkans is also among the points of friction between the European Union and Russia.

In its Enlargement Package last week, the European Commission recommended the Council, which brings together the EU Member States, to open accession negotiations with Macedonia and Albania in the light of progress made.

Macedonia and Albania were recognized as candidate countries in 2005 respectively 2014 but have not yet started accession talks.

More specifically, for Macedonia, delivering on urgent reform priorities will be decisive for the country's further progress, stated the Commission. The start of negotiations has been vetoed by Greece on the name issue but the two sides are reportedly close to a solution, provided that they can agree on last-minute Greek demands for changes in the Macedonian constitution.

For Albania, progress will be crucial in the key field in the rule of law, in particular across five key reform priorities, and continuing to deliver concrete and tangible results, in the re-evaluation of judges and prosecutors.

To support this, the Commission will apply a reinforced approach for the negotiating chapters on judiciary and fundamental rights and justice, freedom and security.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said last week that A step forward today for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania is a step forward for the entire Western Balkans region.

All countries in the region have a European perspective and may join the Union in the future, once they have met all conditions, but not all are at the same distance from the finish line.

There are no shortcuts on the way to the EU, stated Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations.

So far, only Serbia and Montenegro have started accession negotiations with the EU. Both countries were criticized last week by the Commission for gaps in the reform process, in particular in the area of freedom of expression.

For Charles Michel, the priority is to strengthen strategic relations with Albania and Serbia and to support these countries in their progress towards more democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights.

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