
EU URGED TO BACK SERBIA AND KOSOVO AS THEY MULL BORDER CHANGE

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The European Union should accept an agreement between Serbs and ethnic Albanians to settle their long-standing dispute over Kosovo, a top official of the bloc said, seeking to dispel fears that any redrawing of the Balkan border might reignite feuds in the volatile region.

Its about a bilateral solution which should not serve as a blueprint for other issues, Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn said Sunday at a press conference in Austria with the president of Serbia and Kosovo, Aleksandar Vucic and Hashim Thaci. Both Balkan states need to normalize relations to qualify for EU membership and once there is an agreement, it should be respected by all members of the worlds biggest trading bloc, he said.

Thaci and Vucic spoke at an international forum in Alpbach, Austria, during the weekend and will resume EU-mediated talks on Sept. 7 in Brussels to reach a deal that Hahn described as geopolitical necessity. Kosovos 2008 declaration of independence, backed the U.S., is recognized by 23 of 28 EU countries. Serbia rejects the secession, and is supported by Russia and China.

Its our task, our responsibility to care about European countries and not to leave it to other parties, third parties somewhere in the world, Hahn said.

Bolton, Merkel

Last week, U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton said the U.S. wouldnt oppose a border change if Serbia and Kosovo reach such agreement, in contrast to German Chancellor Angela Merkel dismissing the possibility earlier this month.

We want to reassure our neighbor countries, EU member states, and other countries in the world, not to be afraid of a potential peaceful agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, even if such a deal implies a border correction, Thaci said. Kosovo and Serbia would not be the first nor the last to make border correction for the sake of peace and need broad backing for a deal, he said.

The 1998-99 war between Kosovos ethnic Albanians and Serb-dominated government troops ended with air raids by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization against Serb targets. The possibility of a border change has caused alarm in a region scarred by a series of wars at the breakup of the former Yugoslavia.

Frozen Conflict

The dispute over Kosovo has been a frozen conflict, Vucic said. Without a permanent solution, someone one day will de-freeze it and then wed have a war. And none of us wants a war, he said. EU accession is vital for aspiring members in the Balkans, but the bloc wont take in countries that cant resolve their conflicts, Hahn said. Vucic said a deal isnt imminent, due to likely opposition at home where voters may not welcome a compromise. The influential Serbian Orthodox Church has warned that even if Serbia regains a sliver of Kosovo, it would mean giving up on the rest of the sacred land, home to hundreds of ancient Serb churches and monasteries.

The border created in 2008 left some 120,000 Serbs as a minority among Kosovos 1.8 million people, with about 50,000 ethnic Albanians on the other side of the frontier, in the so-called Presevo Valley of Serbias south. Territorial adjustments would enable parts of the communities to live in territory where their ethnic kin forms a majority.

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