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## **ALBANIAN PM: A 'LUKEWARM' EU IS HURTING THE BALKANS**

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France 24 (10 April 2019)

The Balkan countries are hurting from the stalled integration process with the European Union, where member states are growing weary of enlargement, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama told AFP in an interview.

"I believe (the Western Balkans) are not as well off today as we were two years ago," the premier said from his office in Tirana, adding he had "no doubt" it was linked to growing uncertainty about the EU's commitment to the region as a whole.

All countries in the Western Balkans, a poor corner of southeast Europe surrounded by EU member states, aspire to join the bloc.

Montenegro and Serbia are furthest along in accession negotiations, hoping to join by 2025, while Albania and North Macedonia expect to see their bids opened this June. Further behind are Bosnia and Kosovo.

But as European Parliament elections approach, the region is feeling increasingly unwelcome as public opinion and politicians inside the bloc, particularly in France, sour on the prospect of bringing in new members.

Rama said he could understand the "lukewarmness" around enlargement in light of rising populism, Euro-scepticism and other turmoil.

But the "lack of clarity" has consequences for the fragile Balkans, he added, recalling a warning that European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker delivered last year.

If "the impression arises that we're not serious about offering the prospect of EU membership to the western Balkans, then we might see later -- and probably even sooner -- what we saw in the Balkans in the 1990s," Juncker said, referring to a decade of brutal conflict as the former Yugoslavia fell apart.

While Rama did not use the dramatic "EU or war" phrasing, he said a "deepening" of European engagement was needed to tackle tensions between Balkan neighbours.

For example, he places some blame with Brussels for a recent nosedive in already bitter relations between Serbia and Kosovo, a former province that is mainly ethnic Albanian.

The spark of their latest dispute -- Kosovo's imposition of a 100 percent tariff on Serbian goods -- was a "political cry" after Brussels failed to lift visa requirements for Kosovars inside the Union,

Rama argued.

While the European Parliament has recommended scrapping the visa requirements since Pristina met all the conditions, EU member states have not followed suit and opening their doors.

"We would not have these 100 percent tariffs if there had been visa liberalisation," Rama said.

What the Balkans needs, he said, is "a relationship with a Europe where we are not hostage to the internal dynamics of the member states."

### **'We love Europe'**

As for his own country of around 2.8 million, it "deserves" the promised opening of accession negotiations in June "without a doubt".

Last June, the EU delayed starting negotiations by another year for Albania and neighbouring North Macedonia which now expects a reward for agreeing a difficult diplomatic deal that involved changing its name to settle a dispute with Greece.

Rama also warned that if the EU now decides only to kick off North Macedonia's bid while leaving Albania behind, it would show a "monumental blindness from a strategic point of view".

In Albania, the main refrain from Brussels is the need to tackle widespread corruption and organised crime.

Rama feels the focus on crime has been "inflated" and is used to justify a delay in starting negotiations.

"Crime, crime, crime. Of course we have a crime problem but no more than other countries that are even members of the Union," he countered.

But the longing for a future inside the bloc has not abated in his country, he claims.

"We are still in love with Europe. That's the problem. That's why we don't like delays, lukewarmness."

<https://www.france24.com/en/20190410-albanian-pm-lukewarm-eu-hurting-balkans>

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