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## **BALKAN HOPEFULS AWAIT EUROPEAN COUNCIL DECISION ON TALKS**

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As the European Council of Ministers is set to convene on Tuesday in Luxembourg, North Macedonia and Albania fear they will not get what they hoped for – a date for a start to their EU accession talks.

Due to a number of still sceptical EU member states, the most that North Macedonia and Albania can hope now for is further encouragement for reforms and a postponement of a concrete decision on a start to talks till autumn, some observers said.

It is certain that there won't be any significant decision at the Council of Ministers, said Simonida Kacarska, from the Skopje-based European Policy Institute, an NGO.

The best scenario would be if the European Council gives a green light to the Commission to start working on a negotiation framework, but at the moment that sounds an optimistic option and we cannot say whether it may come true, Kacarska added.

Ahead of the meeting, Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn on Monday called on enlargement sceptical countries to reconsider and deliver a firm date for North Macedonia at least.

Hahn said the credibility of the EU enlargement process, and of Balkan reforms, were both in jeopardy.

My message to sceptical member states: the EU accession process must be based on credibility & reliability. If a partner country like North Macedonia delivers evident achievements, #EU has to deliver, too. We cannot afford the risk that the reform-process is slowed down or halted, Hahn tweeted.

The European Commission in May recommended the EU to open membership talks with both North Macedonia and Albania – but left a decision on the date to the European Council in June.

However, earlier this month, the German Bundestag failed to take any decision on supporting a start date for accession talks with either North Macedonia or Albania, dealing a blow to both countries' aspirations.

The German decision means that a debate on when to open accession talks with the two countries cannot be put on the agenda of the European Council later this month. The issue will now have to be postponed to autumn at the earliest.

The hesitation of the German parliament also added to the existing doubts of France and the

Netherlands, who have been especially critical of the recent political crisis in Albania, also citing a lack of progress in the fight against crime in the country.

North Macedonia has insisted that the two countries should be assessed separately.

This was also a point of dispute over the past weekend between the President of North Macedonia, Stevo Pendarovski, and the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama.

Responding to Pendarovskis claims that each country should be assessed individually, according to its own achievements, Rama said this would be unjust.

Rama said Albanians should not be left out, noting also that ethnic Albanians, who form about a quarter of the population in North Macedonia, have greatly contributed to the democratization of that country in the past few years.

So far only two western Balkan countries have joined the EU, Slovenia and Croatia. Two others, Serbia and Montenegro, have opened accession talks while North Macedonia and Albania have candidate status and are awaiting a date for a start to membership talks.

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