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## **SERBIA ON COURSE FOR EU BY 2025, TOP EU OFFICIAL SAYS**

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Reuters (19 January 2018)

The European Union is launching a diplomatic effort to accelerate steps to bring six countries in the Western Balkans into the EU fold after years of stop-start progress.

It is time to finish the work of 1989, European Commissioner Johannes Hahn told Reuters, referring to the EUs eastward expansion after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

We have set 2025 as an indicative date for Serbia and Montenegro, which is realistic but also very ambitious.

Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia all hope to join the European Union but have seen their membership chances fade in recent years as the blocs politicians, faced with rising eurosceptism at home, the 2009-2013 eurozone crisis and Britains vote to leave the bloc, appeared to lose interest.

But rising Russian influence, a migration crisis that straddles the region, Turkeys drift towards authoritarian rule and a desire to strengthen European integration after Britain leaves in 2019 have presented the Balkans with an opportunity.

Either we export stability to the region or we import instability, Hahn said, arguing that the EUs accession process was the best way to fight corruption, organised crime and the threat of authoritarianism in the region.

Serbia is seen as the lynchpin and the EU hopes Belgrades influence in the Balkans could help others reform.

Hahn is set to visit Serbia in February after publishing the Commissions official Balkan strategy on Feb. 6, followed by Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who is expected to visit all six countries in a gesture of support.

Hahn will also travel to Washington next month to meet U.S. State Department officials to outline the EUs Balkan push. With neighbouring Bulgaria holding the EUs rotating presidency from January to June, European Union leaders will hold a special Balkan summit in Sofia in May. Britain is also set to host another top-level Balkan gathering in July.

### **WAKE-UP CALL**

In another sign of momentum, Macedonia could be offered an invitation to join the U.S.-led NATO military alliance if it can resolve a dispute with Greece over the former Yugoslav republics name,

NATO diplomats say.

Hahn said he was confident the issue could eventually be resolved following United Nations talks this month. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, in a visit to Macedonia on Wednesday, also said he saw hope for resolving the name issue.

Obstacles to meeting EU membership terms abound, however.

The six Balkan countries banking systems and judiciaries are weak, and incomes in the region are 30 percent of those in the euro zone, according to the International Monetary Fund.

The region is scarred by the ethnic conflicts that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Bosnia remains deeply divided. Serbia does not recognise the independence of Kosovo, its former province, and accuses it of seeking war with Belgrade. Montenegro was mired in political crisis for much of 2017.

The EU's strategy rests on Serbia and Kosovo reaching a normalisation of relations by the end of 2019, according to a draft version of the bloc's Balkan plan seen by Reuters.

Hahn conceded that the killing of Kosovo Serb leader Oliver Ivanovic on Tuesday showed the instability of the region.

I hope this is a wake-up call to responsible politicians. I ask for statesmanship to understand that only cooperation, reconciliation is the only way forward, he said.

<https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN1F80VC>

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