

Germany's Merkel to visit Serbia, Croatia

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Talks on Croatia and Serbia's European Union prospects will be on the agenda during a visit by German Chancellor Angela Merkel starting Monday, when she will also press for a cooling of frictions between Belgrade and Kosovo.

The leader is embarking on the trip despite the financial crisis currently engulfing Europe, seen by many as a strong sign of Germany's diplomatic commitment to the region.

"Germany is back" in the Balkans, analyst Davor Gjenero told Croatian daily Vjesnik.

It is the first time since 2003 that a leader of the German government has visited Zagreb and Belgrade.

And at a time when Europe's economic problems are likely to threaten EU enlargement, the trip is perceived in the region as an important demonstration of the major EU and eurozone player's interest in the Balkans.

Merkel will meet with Croatian President Ivo Josipovic and Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor in Zagreb on Monday when, according to the daily Jutarnji List, she will call on officials to proceed with reforms and anti-corruption measures.

Croatia is due to join the EU in summer 2013.

Kosovo will meanwhile be the main topic of discussion with Serbian officials in Belgrade on Tuesday.

The visit takes place a few days ahead of the resumption of EU-mediated talks between Belgrade and Pristina in Brussels on September 2 and almost a month after violent scenes in Kosovo's Serb-majority north.

Although it declared independence from Serbia in 2008, Belgrade considers Kosovo a southern province.

"One of my tasks will be to convince Serbia that it must resume dialogue with Kosovo," said Merkel in her weekly podcast broadcast on the Chancellery website on Saturday.

It is up to each country in the region to "work in agreement with their neighbours to resolve conflicts peacefully and show mutual respect," the chancellor said.

Some in Serbia fear that Merkel will put pressure on leaders to "abandon Kosovo

completely," Milan Nikolic from the Centre of Political Studies told the Blic daily.

"The most influential European countries, like Germany, Britain and France, want a swift solution in Kosovo and they see this as leaving the north to Pristina authorities," he said.

Merkel "will insist on the fact that north Kosovo belongs" to Pristina, former Serbian ambassador to Germany Ognjen Pribicevic told the Politika newspaper.

Belgrade will meanwhile press the case for Serbia gaining EU candidate status by the end of the year and a date for the beginning of accession talks, Serbia's deputy prime minister Bozidar Djelic told media.

"Serbia for sure is ready to start negotiations next year and Serbia knows that it is going to take years for us to join the EU after that," Djelic said, adding that a date for talks was important to keep the focus on the route towards European integration.

On Kosovo he said: "We certainly know that the issue needs to be solved before we join the EU. At the same time, everybody knows that we are not going to accept (the declaration of independence in 2008)".

Source eubusiness.com