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## **RAMA AND VUCIC MOVE AHEAD WITH 'OPEN BALKAN' SUMMIT WITHOUT ZAEV**

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EXIT NEWS (2 November 2021)

The leaders of Albania and Serbia, Edi Rama and Aleksandar Vucic, are moving ahead with their trilateral Open Balkan summit on November 3 in Belgrade, despite the resignation of Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev.

Rama and Vucic met on the margins of the UN climate change summit in Glasgow, UK, on Monday. Voicing strong support for their Open Balkan initiative, Vucic questioned whether the trilateral summit should still be held.

Should we hold or postpone the meeting in Belgrade, having in mind the events in Skopje, he tweeted.

Nevertheless, Ramas office told Euronews on Tuesday that nothing has changed in the prime ministers agenda, and that North Macedonia will be represented by another government official.

Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev resigned on Sunday, following his partys defeat in local elections. It remains unclear whether a new coalition government will be formed by the current parliament or snap elections will take place.

Macedonian opposition leader Hristijan Mickoski has refused to comment on the Rama-Vucic-Zaev initiative, arguing that no information has been released on the plan and its aims, apart from the leaders public appearances in related summits. Considering his praise of Kosovos refusal to join the Open Balkan, one might infer that Mickoski is less than sympathetic to the idea.

Initially launched by Vucic and Rama in 2019 and named Mini Schengen, the initiative aimed at creating a free trade area among the six Western Balkan countries: Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The leaders changed its name to Open Balkan in an attempt to revamp it, following backlash from neighboring countries but also opposition at home, mostly in Albania.

Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia refused to join due to fears that the initiative would risk keeping the region further away from European Union integration. They argued that under the Berlin Process, and the similar but more robust Common Regional Market initiative, these countries are safer in their prospects of joining the EU.

However, owing also to the good relationship between the three leaders, Rama, Vucic and Zaev

have kept the idea at the forefront of regional politics with frequent summits, warnings and criticism against non-aligning neighbors, but with little concrete results.

So far, they have signed an agreement on cooperation in cases of natural disasters, and two memorandums on facilitating the movement of goods and workers.

With Zaev out of the picture for the time being and the initiative going back to the hands of its initiators, the Open Balkan initiative may suffer considerable blows in the near future. With only Rama and Vucic at the helm, finding new ways to make the initiative attractive will pose a real challenge to the whole project.

<https://exit.al/en/2021/11/02/rama-and-vucic-move-ahead-with-open-balkan-summit-without-zaev/>

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