



Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia external relations briefing:
A controversial non-paper re-opens the question of
border changes in the Western Balkans**
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A controversial non-paper re-opens the question of border changes in the Western Balkans

Summary

The contents of a controversial non-paper titled “Western Balkans- a way forward” has reverberated across the Balkans throughout April. The paper, which discusses border changes in the region has been attributed to Janez Janša, the Prime Minister of Slovenia. Although he denied this, other leaders from the region confirmed to have seen the paper, raising suspicions with regards to both the origin and the purpose of the document. The non-paper is particularly controversial as it has emerged only a couple of months ahead of the start of the 2021 Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which the country will hold from the 1st of July until the end of the year. Regardless of its origin, the reactions to the document suggest that it could have served as a testing ground for potential territorial changes in the region, which could have serious implications for the territorial integrity and stability of the Macedonian state.

The alleged “non-paper” surfaced on April 12th on the Bosnian news portal *politicki.ba* and was quickly picked up and circulated by the media across the region.¹ According to the original story the leaked document states that “one of the priorities of the Slovenian presidency with the Council of the European Union will be the redrawing of the borders on the territory of former Yugoslavia”². Moreover, it informs that the non-paper had been passed on from the Prime Minister of Slovenia to the President of the European Council Charles Michel. On the 15th of April, a Slovenian media portal released the full contents of the controversial non-paper titled “Western Balkans- a way forward”, which has been attributed to PM of Slovenia Janez

¹ Politicki.ba (2021). Janša predvodi države EU koje žele "veliku Srbiju" i komadanje BiH, Crne Gore, Sjeverne Makedonije, published on 12.04.2021, available at

<https://politicki.ba/news/read/15926> accessed on 27.04.2021

² Ibid

Janša.³ Whilst Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić stated that he had not seen the alleged non-paper, PM of Albania Edi Rama confirmed that he had seen it.^{4 5}

The document is divided in three parts subtitled Situation, Solutions and Steps. In the first part the document states that “the main issue of the Western Balkan region is the unresolved national issues of the Serbs, Albanians and Croatians”. Furthermore, it states that “progress has been made in North Macedonia and Montenegro, but key issues nevertheless remain unresolved”. With reference to the European perspective of the region it argues that “this is difficult to imagine for Serbia and Kosovo based on the existing methods and rhythm of problem solving”. Moreover, it notes that Turkey has taken advantage of the situation “by enhancing its influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia”.⁶ In the section titled “Solutions” the document proposes several border changes, with implications for the broader region. Firstly, it calls for the “unification of Kosovo and Albania”. Secondly, it proposes that a larger part of the territory of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be united with Serbia. It stipulates that in this way Serbia will be convinced “to agree on Kosovo joining with Albania”. In terms of Croatia, it states that “the predominantly Croatian cantons in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be joined with Croatia”. It further proposes that Bosniaks should “gain an independently functional state”, but states that “the situation there can deteriorate as a result of the increasingly stronger influence of Turkey and radical Islam”.⁷ Finally, it suggests that following the adoption of all the bilateral steps required for the ratification of this plan, the accession to the EU and NATO are to accelerate.⁸ In the third part titled “Steps” the non-paper suggests that certain steps have already been taken towards preparing the ground for the implementation of the plan. For instance, it states that gathering support for the plan from

³ Necenzurirano.si (2021). Objavljamo dokument o razdelitvi BiH, ki ga išče ves Balkan, published on 15.04.2021, available at <https://necenzurirano.si/clanek/aktualno/objavljamo-slovenski-dokument-o-razdelitvi-bih-ki-ga-isce-ves-balkan-865692> accessed on 27.04.2021

⁴ Euractive (2021). Vučić says he never saw alleged non-paper on redrawing Western Balkan borders published on 19.04.2021, available at https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/vucic-says-he-never-saw-alleged-non-paper-on-redrawing-western-balkan-borders/ accessed on 27.04.2021

⁵ European Western Balkans (2021). Reactions to the “non-paper”: Ideas of border change rejected, but they will not go away, published on 20.04.2021, available at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/04/20/reactions-to-the-non-paper-ideas-of-border-change-rejected-but-they-will-not-go-away/> accessed on 27.04.2021

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

regional decision-makers is already “underway” as part of a so-called “silent procedure”. In a footnote it clarifies that the non-paper will remain a non-paper until the needed agreement from regional and international decision makers can be guaranteed.⁹ Although the non-paper does not specifically mention border changes that would affect N. Macedonia, the map that has accompanied the document clearly shows a large section of the territory of the Western part of N. Macedonia as belonging within a new greatly expanded Albanian state.¹⁰

The EU institutions have remained silent with no official reaction issued three weeks after the non-paper was first leaked.¹¹ When asked to comment on the silence MEP Ilhan Kyuchyuk, European Parliament's Standing Rapporteur on North Macedonia said it was "probably because they were not sure about the origin of the document."¹² Instead of issuing an official statement, when asked about the non-paper EU officials have labelled it as a ‘non-issue’ and repeated the EU’s official stance on the region. In response to a question posed during a Press Conference, Josep Borrell, High Representative the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, commented: “I want to use this opportunity to underline the continuous and unequivocal support of the European Union to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as much as [to] the other countries of the Western Balkans.”¹³ Nonetheless, whilst some labelled the absence of an official response on behalf of the EU as an intentional move aimed at discrediting the non-paper, others criticized it for the open space it had left for risky speculations, which some argued may pave the way for political destabilization.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Euronews (2021). Non-paper, non-reaction: Why is the EU silent over explosive memo on redrawing Bosnia's borders? Published on 24.04.2021, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2021/04/23/non-paper-non-reaction-why-is-the-eu-silent-over-explosive-memo-on-redrawing-bosnia-s-bord> accessed on 27.04.2021

¹² Ibid

¹³ Serbia: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the press conference with President Vučić, published on 26.04.2021, available at https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/97268/Serbia:%20Remarks%20by%20High%20Representative/Vice-President%20Josep%20Borrell%20at%20the%20press%20conference%20with%20President%20Vu%C4%8Di%C4%87 accessed on 27.04.2021

Reactions from the Macedonian political scene

The non-paper sent shockwaves across the Macedonian society raising new fears about destabilization and border reshuffles which may affect the country. However, neither the Office of the Prime Minister nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued official statements on the document. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev stated that the Government had not yet received such a document adding that “our country is a member of NATO, our territorial integrity is guaranteed by article 5 of the NATO pact, in addition to being guaranteed by our Constitution. As a Government we believe in the lifting of the borders only through EU accession, when the Schengen mechanism is fulfilled as is the case between countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Italy and Austria”.¹⁴ The office of President Stevo Pendarovski issued a comment that regardless of whether the document exists or not, the position of the President is well known: “Any border redrawing in the Balkans will not contribute towards regional stability. The President is convinced that such ideas for border reshuffles in the Balkans will not gain support from the EU.” Moreover, the comment adds that “the only path towards a better life and well-being for the citizens and the state is the implementation of reforms which are necessary in order for us to join the European family”.¹⁵ A similar comment was made by Nikola Dimitrov, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and current Vice-Prime Minister on European Affairs: “When borders follow ethnic lines, that is a leftover practice from colonial times. In Europe there haven’t really been border changes. Anyone who is concerned with the stability and the future of the Balkans should believe in the European thesis - we need to make borders less visible and less relevant”, Dimitrov stated.¹⁶ Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani was accused for refusing to provide an explicit answer to the question of whether or

¹⁴ Lokalno (2021). “Zaev - we haven’t received any non-paper”, published on 16.04.2021, available at <https://lokalno.mk/zaev-ne-sme-dobile-nikakov-non-pejper-vladata-veruva-vo-otstranuvane-na-granitsite-samo-so-vlezot-vo-eu/> accessed on 27.04.2021

¹⁵ Radio Free Europe (2021). Pendarovski - I haven't talked with Pahor about border redrawals, published on 15.04.2021 available at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/%D0%BF%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B4%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8--%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D1%81%D1%83%D0%BC-%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BB-%D1%81%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%85%D0%BE%D1%80-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%98%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%9A%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-/31205101.html> accessed on 27.04.2021

¹⁶ Radio Free Europe, “Dimitrov on the non-paper: European thesis instead of ethnic borders” published on 14.04.2021 available at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/31203097.html> accessed on 27.04.2021

not he supports border changes in the Balkans during a TV interview.¹⁷ Instead he gave an implicit answer which stated “We see the answer to the question of borders in the Balkans in the relativization of the borders by their integration in the EU. The only alternative is the accession of the entire region in the EU and NATO. We would not like to be a part of debates whose origin and authorship we don’t know.”¹⁸

Although there is no certainty with regards to the origin of the non-paper, it has nonetheless raised alarms across the region. Many have described the leaked document as a testing ground, which aims to check the regional perceptions on the question of border changes. At the same time, the document is directly correlated to the EU perspective of the countries from the Western Balkans. It has arrived at a time when the prospect for the EU accession of countries such as N. Macedonia appears to be very distant and uncertain, in spite of repeated promises to the contrary by EU bureaucrats and domestic leaders. It is the fading of the EU perspective which many have blamed for the emergence of new and dangerous scenarios, such as those described in the non-paper. Further suspicions rose amongst the Macedonian public in light of the fact that this is the third non-paper, which has made headlines in the country in the past 3 years. It follows the French non-paper which announced the first veto on the opening of EU accession talks for N. Macedonia in October 2019 and the Bulgarian non-paper which announced the second veto on the opening of the accession talks with the country in November 2020. Each of these developments first appeared as non-papers but went on to affect the reality of the accession process. In light of this recent history, the alarms which the latest non-paper has raised amongst the Macedonian public can hardly be labelled as unfounded or exaggerated. This is especially the case when considering the repercussions which it may have for the territorial integrity and the broader stability of the country.

¹⁷ Mkd.mk (2021). Bujar Osmani was asked five times whether he is for or against border changes, published on 21.04.2021, available at <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/bujar-osmani-pet-pati-beshe-prashan-dali-e-za-ili-protiv-prekrojuvanje-na> accessed on 27.04.2021

¹⁸ Ibid