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The Balkans' demons of ethno-nationalism

Aggressive ethno-nationalism is once again poisoning the Western Balkans. A recently leaked 'non-paper' envisions new borders along ethnic lines

In Southeastern Europe, the recent leak of a so-called 'non-paper' by the Slovenian online platform *Necenzurirano* has caused a massive political stir. The 'non-paper', a non-binding document intended for unofficial discussion published on 14 April, was most likely authored by Janez Janša, Slovenia's right-wing populist prime minister with excellent ties to Hungary's Viktor Orbán. The text, which the Slovenian Foreign Ministry claims to have known nothing about, has allegedly been sent to EU Council President Charles Michel as early as February.

The non-paper complains about 'chaos and non-functioning institutions' in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). It identifies the 'unresolved national issues of Serbs, Albanians and Croatians' as the 'main issue of the Western Balkan region'. At first glance, the proposed 'solutions' may sound level-headed and pragmatic. In reality, however, they are a recipe for creating ethnically homogeneous nation states – or what the war in the 1990s failed to do.

The paper revives ugly memories of genocide and ethnic cleansing: Kosovo is supposed to be united with Albania and the Serbian part of Kosovo given special status; major parts of the Republika Srpska, the Serbian entity in BiH, are supposed to go to Serbia. The predominantly Croatian part of BiH's second entity, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is either to be united with Croatia or accorded special status.

Aside from its political effects in the Western Balkans, the Slovenian non-paper reveals how

Already in a speech to the North Macedonian Parliament in September 2020, Slovenia's social-democratic President Borut Pahor warned that if the EU enlargement process is significantly delayed, 'the belief might eventually prevail in the region that (...) ethnic

right-wing populist governments are attempting to divide the EU from within.

borders should be established instead of the existing one'. He added that historical experience showed that 'there is very little possibility of such a process unfolding peacefully'.

Stoking nationalist sentiments

In retrospect – and in light of the non-paper –, Pahor's speech sounds like a warning about the aspirations of his prime minister and right-wing nationalists in the region. His concern had led him to alert BiH's three-member Presidency of these plans. Much about the non-paper, which EU Council President Michel says he never received, is dubious. Yet *whoever* wrote it, whoever *leaked* it and regardless of whether it was really sent to and arrived in Brussels: those who seek to stoke nationalist sentiments through ethnic irredentism – the ideology that members of a single ethnic group should be living in one state – have succeeded.

Necenzurirano states that parts of the paper were written in Budapest. Hungary's political and economic influence has grown considerably since March 2020, when Janša began his second term as Slovenian head of government. For his part, Janša has developed an authoritarian, radical right-wing political style that Tanja Fajon, a Slovenian Member of the European parliament, calls the 'Orbánisation of Slovenia'.

These are not good prospects for the Slovenian EU Council Presidency, which begins on 1 July. Aside from its political effects in the Western Balkans, the Slovenian non-paper reveals how right-wing populist governments are attempting to divide the EU from within. The justified reactions play into the hands of the nationalist Croatian governing party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), and its Bosnian-Herzegovinian offshoot, which are stubbornly promoting their own supposedly moderate agenda of a third entity in BiH for the Croatian population claiming the latter are allegedly discriminated against and politically underrepresented.

Pandora's open box

Of course, nationalist separatism and borders along ethnic lines are by no means new ideas. They are the root of the evil that, over and over again for many centuries, has plunged the Balkans into the abyss of violent hatred.

Fortunately, the reactions from Europe and the US were clear: The EU

delegation and EU member states' ambassadors to BiH jointly reaffirmed the country's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity. The American embassy stated virtually the same thing. But even if new ethnic boundaries are not being drawn right now, the damage has been done. People who survived siege, forced displacement and war are re-traumatised. These days, Western Balkan media are all using the image of Pandora's open box.

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Many people in Bosnian and Herzegovina, especially Bosnian Muslims, are stunned at how outsiders are once again discussing their country's breakup. However, the same scenario has been promoted since the Dayton Accords of 1995 – especially from within the Serbian entity in BiH. Hardly a day passes without Milorad Dodik, the Serbian member of the country's tripartite presidency, seeking to undermine the foundations of his own state by fuelling an aggressive Serbian irredentism. His reaction to the non-paper was more of the same. Dodik bluntly declared that he would continue to work for BiH's 'peaceful dissolution'. The hypocrisy is well known: Those responsible for the dysfunctionality of state institutions are the same that criticise it the loudest.

The demons of ethno-nationalism

Although Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has been noticeably reticent regarding the non-paper, political observers point out that the document clearly bears his signature, which is also seen as a sign of Moscow's support. No surprise here: Creating greater uncertainty in Bosnia-Herzegovina and stirring up segregation efforts is a predictable part of Russia's foreign policy.

The protecting power of the (Bosnian-)Serbian cause is currently in conflict with the EU and the US over a successor to Austrian diplomat Valentin Inzko. As the High Representative for the Implementation of the Dayton Accords, Inzko has been in office for 12 years. The Germans have proposed former Agriculture Minister Christian Schmidt. But Russia is calling for an end to the Office of the High Representative (OHR). Whether the telephone conversation between the German Chancellor Merkel and Putin on 8 April resulted in any rapprochement is unclear.

Regardless of trying to pass of the ideas, the author(s) of the non-paper had already thought about expected reactions, writing that 'should the silent procedure of checking (...)' would reveal 'that the needed agreement of the regional and international decision-makers cannot be guaranteed, the non-paper remains a non-paper until further developments'. But it's not that simple. The genie is back out of the bottle and the demons of aggressive ethno-nationalism are once again poisoning the Western Balkans.



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