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International Intervention in Croatia during the Yugoslav Wars

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The time immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall was characterized by a general feeling of euphoria. The European nations believed that the time of wars was over and that, thanks to the new world order, conflicts would be resolved in a peaceful manner through negotiation and cooperation, rather than through violence and military action. However, all these optimistic visions deteriorated with the sudden outbreak of the Yugoslav war. Something as unlikely as an armed conflict in the twentieth-century Europe became a reality. The Western governments were faced with tasks that contradicted their expectations. After the Cold War, they wanted to focus on domestic recovery and had no desire to get involved in any peacekeeping missions or military interventions. Yet, they had to respond to the developments in the Balkans at some point, since the existing institutions and norms of the West were called into question and, at the same time, the stability of the continent as a whole could have been in danger if the secessionist movements were to spread into other regions. The Western powers finally took action to stop the conflict in Yugoslavia and, eventually, a ceasefire was reached. However, the nature and the results of the Western intervention have been subject to a great amount of criticism. This essay is going to examine the international intervention in Croatia. It will not provide a historical account of all actions taken in Croatia, but it will exclusively focus on the mistakes that intervening powers made during their peacekeeping missions and, by doing so, it will try to answer the question if the international intervention helped to resolve the conflict or not. The argument will be made that, even though, Western powers did achieve some minor victories, international diplomacy failed to accomplish its main objectives and in several cases even exacerbated the violence and disintegration in Croatia. It will also be claimed that several aspects of the intervention could have been done differently and the war could have been a lot shorter, less serious, or even fully prevented.

First of all, in order to apply effective policies and resolve the conflict successfully it was necessary to identify the original causes and the true character of the war in Croatia. Sadly, the Western governments failed to understand the roots of the conflict and formed a misguided perception of the whole situation. They especially underestimated the link between the internal affairs of a given country and the general international environment. As Susan Woodward put it in her *Balkan Tragedy*, Western leaders defined the war in Croatia as an ethnic conflict, as a conflict 'irrelevant to their national interests and collective security... as an unpleasant reminder of old ethnic and religious conflicts that modern Europe had left behind, rather than as a part of their own national competition to redefine Europe and respond to the end of the Cold War'.^[1] Furthermore, the perception of the conflict as something remote and distant was intensified by creating a feeling of otherness and by making a strong distinction between them and us. A Croat journalist, Slavenka Drakulić, wrote in her article about Europe's perception of the war as an ethnic conflict and an 'ancient legacy of hatred and bloodshed' that 'in this way the West tells us, "You are not Europeans, not even Eastern Europeans. You are Balkans, mythological, wild, dangerous Balkans. Kill yourselves if that is your pleasure. We do not understand what is going on there, nor do we have clear political interests to protect".^[2] The West viewed the Croats, and the Yugoslavs in general, as a barbarian nation of little importance which cannot be saved and does not even deserve to be helped. By classifying the conflict as an inevitable and inherent act of ancient ethnic hatred the West gained sufficient grounds for non-intervention and justified its inaction, which was the first crucial mistake at the early stages of the conflict.

Secondly, when the West finally recognized that it should take an interest in the conflict, individual leaders could not

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agree on common methods or even the aims of their intervention. At first, the international community, and the US in particular, publicly voiced its opposition to secession and supported the continued territorial integrity of Yugoslavia. In contrast, Germany and Belgium supported the other viewpoint favouring the possible recognition of Slovenia and Croatia in particular.[3] Thus the EC and the US sent ambiguous messages which inevitably led to confusion and, consequently, it was nearly impossible to come up with a consistent and efficient plan, with the result that Western action was slow and had a minor impact. Moreover, there was a deep disagreement on the use of force, or at least the threat of it, as a means to back policies and ensure that they are respected by the warring parties. Instead, 'the many conflicting signals could have been read in several ways; the effect was to encourage all parties to the conflict to believe their chosen course would eventually win, and thus to become more tenacious'.[4]

Further, it has frequently been argued that the Western intervention was too little, too late. The conflict in Croatia was a result of a long process and Western leaders simply did not see – or intentionally overlooked – some early warnings. Paul Shoup in his *The Disintegration of Yugoslavia and Western Foreign Policy* asks if it might have been possible to avoid the civil war through early action by the international community. However, he indicates that it was almost impossible to define the right moment for an intervention.[5] To illustrate his point, he cites a number of scholars who all identify the right time for an intervention with a different year or event. To name just a few, Ivo Daalder suggested the year 1991, Jasna Dragović-Soso proposed the year 1988, Christopher Bennet recommended the year 1987, and that still does not exhaust all the possibilities. Nevertheless, Shoup comes to a conclusion that by the time the US decided to take action, the country was already beyond saving.[6] To put it simply, the Western powers reacted to events rather than anticipated them. Actions that could have made a big difference five or six months earlier came too late and often with too little commitment.

As was mentioned earlier, besides some minor achievements, the actual intervention was a failure. First of all, the original goal of the intervention – the maintenance of the Yugoslav territorial integrity – was never accomplished. 'The EC Declaration of 16 December 1991 formally confirmed the switch in policy by the international community away from insisting on the maintenance of Yugoslavia's territorial integrity and towards legitimising secession, albeit within the confines of Yugoslavia's internal republic borders'.[7] Even more importantly, the international community failed to manage the Yugoslav dissolution in a peaceful manner. The argument for a peaceful settlement was made by Lord Carrington, the Chairman of the EC Conference on Yugoslavia. No changes could be made to borders except by peaceful agreement. The EC Declaration stated that the EC was 'determined never to recognise changes of any borders which have not been brought about by peaceful mean and by agreement'.[8] However, this rule was not adhered to for long. Croatia soon conducted a series of invasive military attacks into several regions in order to regain control over lost territories. Surprisingly enough, these actions encountered no punishment and were even supported by some Western powers. But this will be discussed later in the essay.

Ironically, one of the most significant achievements of Western diplomacy, the Vance Plan of 1991, can also be considered as one of its great failures. It called for the complete withdrawal of all Serb military units and the YPA from the republic of Croatia. It also provided for the establishment of UN Protected Areas and, additionally, the plan required a complete demobilization of all military units, including the Croatian National Guard as well as the army. Only lightly armed police forces could remain in the Protected Areas to maintain order and these were subject to UN forces to assure non-discrimination and the protection of human rights.[9] However, as soon became clear, the Vance Plan had only little impact on the situation in Croatia. In her *Legal Geography of Yugoslavia's Disintegration*, Ana Trbovich argues that the key provisions of the Vance Plan, namely the implementation of the peace plan for settlement, were overturned by the premature recognition of Croatia, whose constitutional law provisions on the rights of national minorities were inadequate to meet the EC conditions on recognition.[10] Also the UNPROFOR Commander, Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar agreed that 'disarmament was not achievable as long as distrust persisted... by the time UNPROFOR was deployed, all sides had been arming in anticipation of further conflict'.[11] Thus, the recognition of Croatia was one of the biggest mistakes of the international community because it did not provide conditions for settlement of the crisis as some anticipated; moreover, it exacerbated uncertainty in the region and gave way to further violence and even ethnic cleansing in the following years.

The Vance Plan did not bring a solution to the conflict. It rather created a new status quo which was further preserved by the presence of the UN forces in Croatia. But Croatia's determination to gain back its territories which were seized

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by the Serbs was the main reason for the failure of the UN to safeguard the status quo; moreover, the failure to maintain peace and prevent further violence. By early 1995, despite the UN arms embargo, Croatia had considerably improved its military position vis-à-vis the Serbs in Croatia and in two short offensives, in Western Slavonia and in Krajina, Croat forces easily regained the territories from Serb forces which had no support from Serbia.[12] Therefore, the Croats ruined the climate of reconciliation because of their own national interests. However, the very fact that Croatia was able to conduct the attacks and breach the ceasefire revealed the incompetency and ineffectiveness of the UN and the Western policy. While Ekwall-Uebelhart and Raevsky acknowledge the military weakness of the UNPROFOR, they argue that the UN troops could have effectively blocked the Croat's main entrance to the disputable areas, for a certain period of time, giving the Serb forces a chance to prepare a defence.[13]

What is even more striking is that the actions of Croatia remained not only unpunished by the Western powers, but they were also supported by the United States. In his memoirs, U.S. President Clinton reveals that the U.S. government had 'authorized a private company to use retired U.S. military personnel to improve and train the Croatian army.'[14] Here it becomes more than obvious that the US and the NATO, instead of engaging in a peace settlement of the crisis, not only made military action possible, but actively supported it, thus, exacerbating the conflict and directly causing more unnecessary atrocities. As Thomas Weiss uncovers in his *Collective Spinelessness*, 'the U.S. government assisted the Croatian military action. Retired U.S. military officers privately trained the Croatian forces, while the CIA reportedly provided crucial intelligence information. The NATO bombing of the Bosnian Serb positions, including command and control capabilities, further facilitated the Croatian military action'.[15]

The second major international attempt to achieve a settlement was the Peace of Dayton. Similarly to the Vance Plan, the Dayton Peace cannot be considered as a fully successful or efficient answer to the crisis. Again, it was a product of compromise which offered a set of cheap solutions that did not have a significant impact. The 'Dayton Peace promised a return to Croatian sovereignty of Serb-held regions, the possibility for Croatian refugees to return to their homes, and the possibility for Serbian refugees to return to their homes in the Krajina or elsewhere in Croatia. Unfortunately, neither issue has been resolved'.[16] The territorial disputes might appear to have been one of the most straightforward tasks to accomplish, but in reality it was not that easy. The region of Eastern Slavonia was restored to Croatian control fairly quickly, on the other hand, 'as of December 2000, Croatian authorities were still demanding the return of Prevlaka to Croatian control, but Montenegrin authorities were suggesting that Croatia voluntarily cede the peninsula, as a gentlemanly gesture'.[17] Additionally, the Dayton Peace provisions for the protection of the human rights of minorities were not respected. Human rights continued to be violated in Croatia. Repeated assaults of the Serbs by the Croats, evictions from housing, together with the firing of many Serbs from their jobs, contributed to massive numbers of people fleeing by 1998.[18]

From the evidence provided above it becomes clear, that the Western intervention in Croatia was in many respects a failure due to its inefficiency, inconsistency and lack of commitment. At this point, a logical question arises. What should have been done differently? How could the conflict have been resolved earlier or in a more peaceful manner? Was there even such a possibility? This will be addressed in the next few paragraphs.

Firstly, the very approach to understanding the Yugoslav dissolution should have been different. If the international community had been more open and ready to accept the new independence of states, an overall solution to the crisis could have been formed and war avoided. 'Had the EC Conference which began in September been organised to help the Yugoslav republics talk to each other, in the framework of a possible right to independence prior to declarations and fighting when there was great uncertainty, its chances of success would have been good'.[19] It now seems obvious that a justifiable approach to avoiding war would have been a simple acceptance of border changes. In fact, it would have been logical even from the historical perspective. The dissolution of Yugoslavia was not an exception, but a late version of transformations that had already taken place in other states of Europe. 'Stability will only come when state borders there are redrawn along ethnic lines, as they have been in the rest of Europe'.[20]

Another crucial momentum which could have made a difference was the use of force. 'Force is the ultimate arbiter

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and any diplomatic policy that does not rely on carrots and sticks will not really get you any far. Without a club in the closet, without a credible threat of force, policy becomes bluff, bluster'.[21] This quotation precisely describes the main problem of Western policy in Croatia, because the warring parties knew that there was no use of force available to ensure compliance of the warring parties with Western resolutions. So the reluctance of appropriate governments to use armed forces basically gave a green light to those who would go to the limits of what they could do without being brought to account. As James Gow argues in his *Triumph of the Lack of Will*, if particularly the United States had been willing to use military force at the early stages of the conflict, peace could have been achieved a lot sooner. 'It is hard to avoid the conclusion that similarly strong US support for implementation of Vance-Owen in 1993 (as for Dayton) would have ended the war two and a half years sooner, and on better terms'.[22]

James Gow proposes a further point that could have been done differently and might have produced an alternative outcome for the conflict. He identifies as problematic the EC decision to dispatch the troika to mediate in the Yugoslav conflict in 1991.[23] He argues that this decision was made hurriedly and without clear planning. While he acknowledges that it was correct for the EC to take action following the onset of armed hostilities, he states that 'the EC Council should, however, pause to work through the implications of such a step, as well as to establish a more comprehensive policy framework... There can be no sense in which it was acceptable to initiate a major security policy venture without due attention having been paid and options worked through'.[24] Thus, his final point brings us back to the original criticism of Western intervention provided in this essay. The core problem of the international community was its lack of organization, as well as the lack of will to use more radical means of coercion, such as military force, which would have ensured greater general obedience of the Western policies and ceasefires.

To conclude, there were some ways in which the international intervention made a positive impact on the war in Croatia. James Gow suggests that the international institutions, although ill-equipped and inappropriate, achieved more than was generally credited to them by critics.[25] However, overall, Western action in Croatia was ineffective and only had a limited impact on the situation. This was mainly due to four essential reasons. The intervening powers were inconsistent, the timing of the intervention was wrong, there was a lack of agreement on policies stemming chiefly from a misperception of the Croatian conflict, and there was a lack of will to use sufficient means of force in order to ensure obedience. Because so many crucial mistakes in the intervention attempts can easily be identified, it does not seem difficult to propose alternative solutions and policies which should have been taken. To mention just a few, Western powers, should have used preventive diplomacy and try to avoid the war in its entirety. Also, once acts of violence broke out in Croatia and elsewhere, there should have been a clear and credible signal from the international community that military force would be used in cases of noncompliance. However, the conflict in Croatia was not just about two competing ethnic groups. It was a result of long and very complex developments that touched upon all levels of the state and its society. For this reason, it is very difficult to judge if the proposed alternative actions would really have made a significant impact or if they would have prevented the war completely.

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[1] Woodward, p. 20.

[2] Drakulić, p. 2.

[3] Radan, p. 160.

[4] Woodward, p. 162.

[5] Shoup, p. 346.

[6] Shoup, p. 347.

[7] Radan, p. 166.

[8] Declaration on the Occasion of the Ceremonial Opening of the Conference on Yugoslavia, p. 344.

[9] Trbovich, p. 300.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ekwall-Uebelhart and Raevsky, p. 33.

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[12] Holbrooke, p. 45-6.

[13] Ekwall-Uebelhart and Raevsky , pp. 118-9.

[14] Clinton, p. 667.

[15] Weiss, p. 70.

[16] Ramet, p. 291.

[17] Ibid., p. 292.

[18] Ibid., p. 292.

[19] Gow, p. 326.

[20] Shoup, p. 352.

[21] Gow, pp. 303-4.

[22] Gow, p. 314.

[23] Ibid., p. 326.

[24] Ibid., p. 326.

[25] Gow, p. 323.

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