Failures in western conflict prevention in former Yugoslavia: an exception to the rule or its confirmation?

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Abstract: The 'fiasco' of the international conflict prevention in the Balkans is hardly new. Explanations have been written aplenty, from a more pedestrian direction (blaming the 'irrational' Balkans) to the severe criticism of the EU/international community for failing to both understand the situation and to act properly. Identifying three most prominent failures in EU's intervention in the Yugoslav wars as the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, the utter failure of the Dutch peacekeeping force to prevent the genocide in Srebrenica in June 1995, and the (in)direct impact on the Kosovo crisis, an overview of some of the reasons of the failure(s) is given in the article. These three instances have been chosen as the most outstanding and most significant based on two factors: the loss of life (Srebrenica and the NATO bombing) and the sheer length and depth of the geopolitical crisis (the Kosovo issue).

Keywords: *Yugoslav wars, conflict prevention, EU, international community, the Balkans*

'*We are to blame ourselves for most of it, but I have no words of consolation for the so-called international community, which has very often acted like an elephant in a china shop on the Balkans. It is very unpopular to say so nowadays, but do remember how often this international community which has forced various principles on paper, do remember how often it sat at Sloba's couch, how many times it supported him, how many times it spoke about him what was then repeated by his media-minions (…)*'[31]

Mileta Prodanović, author and painter

The problems ahead

Conflict prevention – especially in former Yugoslavia – has been a burning topic during the last two decades. On a larger scale, the very topic of conflict prevention is a fairly new one, and its connection to the wars in former Yugoslavia, according to many authors, seemed to have strengthened its importance both on the levels of politics and policies, and within the academia. Every so often, however, these two intertwine in what could be called an extremely biased and politicized result. The introduction to the 1997 Chaillot paper #30 by Sophia Clement from the Institute for Security Studies of WEU, Alencon (entitled *Conflict Prevention in the Balkans: Case Studies of Kosovo and the FYR of Macedonia*), is arguably the best example of such a predisposed conjoining, where Guido Lenzi stated how '[t]his Chaillot Paper by Sophia Clément constitutes recognition of the wisdom and perseverance of politicians and the population in the two cases considered here, who are determined to look beyond the most immediate obstacles to stability' (Lenzi in Clement 1997: 4). Needless to say, such blatant praise of political actors does little benefit to the publication itself (the phrase 'the wisdom and perseverance of politicians' sounds primarily political, not academic), even though this particular one raised important questions. This article shall instead seek to analyze and present the most prominent instances of conflict prevention failure during the Yugoslav wars, as well as the more important reasons/explanations for them.

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31) Mileta Prodanovic, Peščanik 28 04 2006 'Za veliki deo svega toga krivi smo sami, ali nemam utešne reči ni za takozvanu međunarodnu zajednicu, koja se vrlo često na Balkanu ponašala kao slon u staklarskoj radnji. Sad je to vrlo nepopularno reći, ali setite se samo u koliko trenutaka je ta međunarodna zajednica koja je na papiru isterivala ove ili one principe, koliko puta je ona sela kod Slobe na kanabe, koliko puta ga je podigla, koliko puta je o njemu izgovarala reči koje su onda ponavljali njegovi medijski poslušnici, u rasponu od ovoga malopre pominjanog anketara zarobljenika do ovih koji su sad u zatvoru.'

Recent analyses of conflict-ridden regions and elementary methodological work in conflict preventing tend to offer a 'country-specific approach tailored to the conditions in a particular country' (Ackermann 2003: 342), as a counter to the earlier ideas of a 'one-fits-all' approach (Lund 2002, Cockell 2002), indicating that the case studies of conflict prevention within the Western Balkans should be approached separately, from a country to country position. As Ackerman wrote, 'effective prevention must be country-context specific' (Ackermann 2003: 343). Nevertheless, even these attempts of country-tailored approaches (in addition to the fact that they have mostly failed), have gone back from specific to general, as it seems that the very actions centered around war-ridden areas of former Yugoslavia (as well as the academic production related to it) have contributed immensely to the development of a more general, broad security policy within the EU, somewhat negating the idea of the country-specific approach. As Ana Juncos noticed, '[i]n the early 1990s, the search for a negotiated solution that could stop the bloody conflict in the Former Yugoslavia was considered by both European and international observers to be the first test for the embryonic Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)' (Juncos 2005: 88). In an eerie way, the conflicts in former Yugoslavia seemed to have been a training enterprise for the EU. As Jankovski wrote, 'the Balkan region has been a major testing ground for the development of the European Union's international role' (Jankovski 2007: 139).

All of the above indicates some problems of a methodological/pragmatic nature that should be used to address this issue. As already noticed, security studies seem to be politically biased (and politically inspired) more often than not, and it is precisely security studies that take this topic as an area of expertise and interest. Yet as the 21st century goes by, international academic research is becoming more and more result- and problem-oriented than discipline-oriented, and so a broader, interdisciplinary approach might yield more effective results. I am talking about history and sociolinguistics (critical discourse analysis, to be more precise), in addition to already expected disciplines of political science, IR and conflict studies. The historical view boasts the possibility of seeing whether the same (or similar) happenings occurred before, while discourse analysis can tell us whether the language used has different meanings and connotations. Every so often, even the very choice of not saying (writing, mentioning) something has a very exact impact and ulterior motive. Steven Blockmans, for instance, in his detailed *Tough Love: The European Union's Relations With The Western Balkans* wrote that 'while maintaining collective defence as it primary task, the greatest and most visible change in NATO's activities since the end of the Cold War is its involvement

in ending conflict, restoring peace and building stability in crisis regions in both Europe and other parts of the world' (Blockmans 32). *Not* mentioning the detrimental NATO action in Yugoslavia in 1999, the bombing which only served to strengthen Milošević (as he officially had 'proof' that 'foreign actors' were to blame for the decrepit state of the country) says a lot in itself. 'In only a few years, NATO transformed itself into an increasingly effective instrument for military and political crisis management. The adaptation and learning process was evident in the way in which peacekeeping in Bosnia-Herzegovina under IFOR and its successor SFOR has evolved and fed into the approach adopted for KFOR since June 1999. NATO deployed in Kosovo after a seventyeight-day air campaign launched to halt a humanitarian catastrophe among Kosovar Albanians at the hands of Belgrade.' Destroying infrastructure and killing civilians, however (both of Serb and Albanian origin, what is more), can hardly be classified as 'halting a humanitarian catastrophe', but as producing one. The problem, however, lies in the fact that 'reading in' a text ('imprinting' meaning by the reader) is an entirely common problem that Discourse Analysis addresses, and the fact that one of the foundations of Serb nationalism during the last two decades was exactly blaming the international community and NATO, meaning that every stronger criticism of NATO (or the international community) could easily be (mis)understood as being positioned on the Serb nationalist side (this is only an example as regards the NATO impact on former Yugoslavia. Blaming the international community is also very common in Croatia as well, for details see: Ramet: 2005).

An artificial polarity is thus created in which NATO is seen either as a 'peace force' or as a dealer in death. Members of the Serb nationalist core have called the NATO bombing 'international terror against the SRY' (Gaćinović 2006: 169), a 'compromise for the extermination of Serbs' (Đuretić 2006: 135) and the 'destruction of Serb history' (Marković 2006: 139). The fact was, nevertheless, that although NATO in general serves as a peacekeeping force, its actions during the Yugoslav crisis have not had much to do with peace or peacekeeping. On the other side, saying that NATO's agenda and perhaps 'ulterior motive' was by no means the 'extermination of Serbs' or 'destruction of Serb history'. These visions of enemies surrounding the nation are highly typical for every nationalism; what is more, they are an essential part of the very nature of nationalist thought (Millroy/Millroy 1999: 43). The point here, however, is also the fact that the NATO intervention helped foster nationalist thought even up to today. Due to the fact that misreading of the text is commonplace, a short glance on the issues of discourse had to be dealt with prior to engaging the very problem at hand.

Already in 2002, Paul Shoup wrote how 'the West can hardly hope to assume the role of an arbiter and peace keeper-cum-policeman and occupier in still another disintegrating republic of the former Yugoslavia' (Shoup 2002: 174), regarding, in this instance, Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the sentence would not need to undergo much transformation to include the bulk of former Yugoslavia as well. For those reasons, Shoup asked: 'Would earlier intervention in the conflict have prevented loss of life and preserved multiculturalism in Bosnia?' (Shoup 2002: 174). This line of thought implies that a Western intervention was perhaps necessary, just 'earlier', or in a 'better' form. He notices that there are two opposing approaches in the question: 'The optimist can point to Western successes in ending the war in Bosnia; in upholding the territorial integrity of Slovenia and Croatia and for the first time ever, reversing ethnic cleansing in the case of Kosovo,' yet 'the opposing, pessimistic view, argues that this has been achieved at the cost of ethnic homogenization, the creation of rump (and even rogue) statelets essentially responsible to no one; the application of draconian sanctions against Serbia (…) and a crisis in Macedonia' (Shoup 2002: 174). On the idea of an 'early warning', Cameron wrote how it is 'of little value unless it is linked to policy formulation and results in timely and effective action. Many conflicts have been widely predicted and the failure to prevent them has been due not so much in the lack of early warning but rather to the absence of political will to take effective action—Rwanda, Kosovo and Darfur being only a few of the most recent and obvious examples' (Cameron 21).

The triple fiasco

But there is another question that needs to be posed: where did the 'international community' (the West: the EU and the USA) fail in conflict prevention and, what is worse, what negative impact has it had in former Yugoslavia? The range of failures-cum-negative impacts will probably never be made into a full, detailed list, yet mentioning at least the biggest of them is of no larger problem. The arguably most detrimental influences of the West during the 1990s wars were the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, the utter failure of the Dutch peacekeeping force to prevent the genocide in Srebrenica in June 1995, as well as the (in)direct impact on the Kosovo crisis, that has resonated until today. I have chosen these three instances as the most prominent and most important based on two factors: the loss of life (Srebrenica and the NATO bombing) and the sheer length and depth of the geopolitical crisis (the Kosovo issue).

The Srebrenica case continues to fascinate and disgust at the same time even today. It is common to wonder how such atrocities were committed on the brink of the 21st century – yet this is a story on its own, one that does not belong to the corpus of this work. The question that needs to be posed, though, is the following: how is it possible for an allegedly professional battalion from the Netherlands, stationed in Srebrenica *at the very time of the massacre* to completely fail to see it? Though I am afraid that the question needs to remain at least somewhat open, I will address it in the paragraphs to come, within the explanation of why Western activities in the Balkans failed in general.

The second instance, the bombing of Serbia, is yet another blatant example of an abysmal decision by the West. 'Contrary to the prevailing view in the West that in the last instance this made Milošević's departure possible (if not inevitable), if one takes a closer look at the political currents in Serbia during the last few years, quite the opposite seems to be true – the bombing postponed the ousting of the regime and thus only prolonged the agony of Serbia under Milošević' (Teokarević 2001: 133). In essence, this was such a 'bad move', that serious wondering about the West's real intentions on the Balkans need to be addressed (in the paragraphs to come). But it was not only the bombing that was detrimental, as many authors have noticed. The 1999 NATO bombing was just the culmination of a foreign policy of containment, which 'The whole policy of containment thus proved largely inefficient and counterproductive (...). Instead of forming a basis for removal of the Milošević regime (in coordination with internal pressures), it allowed it to survive, and even strengthen its hold' (Teokarević 2001: 132). The Milošević nationalist regime – similar to almost any other nationalist regime – worked intensively on Otherizing the West and creating an enemy out of it. The bombing served only to show that Milošević 'was right', and that the 'evil West' had only the destruction of Yugoslavia/Serbia as its goal.

When it comes to the third issue – the lasting one – according to Shoup, 'the pressures generated by the confrontation between NATO and Serbia resulting from the decision to force an early decision of the combatants at Rambouillet, resulted in a hurried agreement in June 1999 which did not bind the Kosovo Albanians and therefore left the future status of Kosovo unresolved' (Shoup 2002: 179). These pressures left the future status of Kosovo much more than simply 'unresolved', however. We need to have in mind that Shoup wrote this in 2002, full six years prior to Kosovo's declaration of independence. According to many authors, Kosovo was the prime 'ignition point' in the process of Yugoslavia's breakup (see: Pavlica 2011, Mihaljčić 1989, Kaser and Halpern 1998, Bieber 2002 etc). The ad hoc nature of the Rambouillet agreement left

a gaping hole of unresolved issues, and in retrospect looks as just a 'quick fix', a patch not intended to last long in the first place, let alone cover more infected tissue that needed to be 'patched up'. Kosovo declared independence in 2008, and even though it had been *de facto* independent for a while even before 2008, it has not received universal international acceptance (which, among many other instances, effectively prohibits Kosovars from traveling on a Kosovo passport to countries such as Spain). It has also continued to be the prime factor of social and geopolitical destabilization in the Western Balkans, especially for Serbia, that has collectively coped with the loss of Kosovo in a less than dignified way. In 2008, organized by the former Prime Minister of Serbia, Vojislav Kostunica, while President Tadić was conveniently absent from the country (a visit to Romania), huge riots took over Belgrade in a destruction spree, supported even by the well known director Emir Kusturica and current world tennis player nr. 1, Novak Đoković. In the words of Svetlana Luković, Koštunica and his rioters effectively took over Tadić's presidential mandate for a night (Luković 2008), a night where even one life was lost in the burning and destruction of the United States embassy in Belgrade. Currently, the echoes of the 'Kosovo is Serbia' program are effectively halting Serbia's ascension to the EU, and it remains to be seen what is going to happen in the near future.

Understanding the Kosovo issue should have, arguably, been a key point in the West's attempts to influence the conflict in Yugoslavia. From the points of view of history and historiography, it could have and should have been more visible how large the problem was. According to Kanin, many Serbs have been 'nurtured by defeat'. 'The Serbs are among those who have developed their identity by moving from defeat to defeat. Enemies have failed to (or refrained from) destroying them, inundating them with non-Serbian settlers, or banishing them to a destructive exile. The iconic battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389 remains an appropriate starting point for a discussion of Serbia's relationship to defeat, but the evolution of songs and memories adapted to the task of honing a Herderian nation, not the battle itself, informs the construction of collective defeat. The peripatetic remains of «Tsar» Lazar, continuing references to his heavenly kingdom, and mass commemorative rallies at the battlefield in 1889 and 1989 remain central, contemporary, touchstones. Serb poets and politicians folded defeats of the 18th and 19th centuries into the Kosovo memory' (Kanin 2011). Conjoined with the so-called 'victim mentality', lucidly explained by the Belgrade philosopher, Radomir Konsantinović (1971), it could have been clearer that bombing Kosovo and Serbia would result in Serbia being able to present itself as a victim anew and anew.

Why the fiasco?

The question of *why* the West had had such a 'fiasco' (Juncos 2012: 1), thus, opens a variety of explanations. One of them is that 'the West was unprepared. Western Europe and the United States were largely ignorant of the depth and scope of the national crisis in Yugoslavia as Communism disintegrated throughout Eastern Europe' (Shoup 2002: 175). According to this school of thought, the West was not prepared on the basis of sheer *ignorance* of the societal and political within the Balkans. According to Batt (2004) and Todorova (2009), the Balkans have 'often been portrayed as a region at odds with "European" values and traditions' (Juncos 2). The negative portrayal of the Balkans (Todorova's 'balkanist' discourse) has been so strong from times, that even 'Slovenia and Croatia have also sought to detach themselves from their Balkan neighbours' (Juncos 3, Vučetić 2001: 124-125). Consequently, in Slovenia, the Balkans could have begun from Croatia and went onwards to the East; in Croatia, they began with Bosnia and Serbia, in Serbia, the Balkans could be Macedonia, etc. It stands to reason to presuppose that the whole region was, simply put, misunderstood. In combination with the fact that, as Jankovski put it, 'the EU is (...) still at an experimental stage in crisis management abroad', no better results could have been expected. Coming back to the Dutch fiasco in Srebrenica, one can but make a conjecture: was it possible that the Dutch battalion basically *failed* to understand that *simply being there* would *not* serve as a deterring factor for the Bosnian Serb forces who have committed the genocide? It is highly doubtful that the Serb forces saw the Dutch as authority figures to which one should bend one's knee and adhere to.

But there seems to be another, maybe even more prominent reason. We have already established that the Balkans were 'a proving ground' in conflict resolution for the EU. It seems that the EU has had its own interest in mind before the willingness to actually help stem the conflict. As Clement wrote (1997: 9), 'many European countries have feared a conflict that might have triggered secessionist movements throughout the Balkans, and the negative impact of this on regional autonomist claims in Western Europe.' Even today, when, for instance, analyzing the issue of Kosovo's independence (which country accepted it and which did not), it seems that those who have not accepted Kosovo as a sovereign country are not doing so simply because they have their own irredenta to worry about. There is a clear self-centered attitude that needs to be addressed. After all, as Clement noticed (1997: 12), 'the failure of conflict prevention measures often results more, or at least as much, from the absence

of common perceptions, the primacy of special political and economic interests and insufficient political will, as it does from the inadequacy of available conflict prevention mechanisms. The determination to act generally results not from a direct attack on a state's vital interests (territorial integrity, economic interests), nor from the first signs of a potential conflict, but rather from the perception of a momentum that is contrary to the interests of international or regional stability.' And indeed, helping the conflict in the Balkans was often not the goal in itself, but 'international and regional stability'. After all, 'at the beginning of the Yugoslav crisis, the Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jacques Poos, then head of the EC (European Community) Presidency, declared that the organization would intervene in Yugoslavia because it was "the hour of Europe, not the hour of the United States" (Juncos 2012 :1, Gordon 1997/1998: 75).' Did Europe intervene just to show the USA it was a 'player' on the field of international intervention solely? In short, diminishing the conflict never seemed to be the goal *per se*.

Conclusion

There are myriad reasons out of which the West failed in its conflict prevention/diminishing during the Yugoslav wars. To sum up, we are dealing with the following:
- The experimental nature of conflict prevention from the side of the EU (the Balkans were a 'testing ground', as expounded by Jankovski).
- The European Union's prime reasons for intervening might have not been result oriented. Saying that one should intervene 'because it is the hour of Europe' instead of at least formally showing that diminishing the conflict, death and misery were the prime reasons of the intervention.
- A poor welcome of the Western influence in almost all regions of former Yugoslavia (Serbia and Bosnia primarily).
- A significant lack of expertise in the politics, history and culture of the region. The West was, bluntly said, extremely unprepared.

This article has summed up the more prominent reasons for the failure of conflict prevention instances in former Yugoslavia, as well as the three major examples of the failure. These are but a few prominent ones. Such failures, however, are not restricted solely to conflict prevention and peacekeeping; it is just that they get caught in the spotlight more easily and more often when acute strife is abound and when lives are getting lost.

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