

The United Nation's Operations in the Former Yugoslavia: Shortcomings in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina

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The United Nations made many critical errors during the Yugoslav crisis of the early 1990s. Early inaction was the first critical error made by the UN during the crisis. This error was followed by six other major errors which combined to essentially destroy any chance of success that the UN might have had in the Yugoslav secessionist wars. The UN also allowed the European Community to take charge of the crisis in the initial phases of the conflict. This was a mistake which caused further delay in UN operations in the Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. As a result of these errors, the conflict in the former Yugoslavia was protracted much longer than it might have been had the UN been better prepared to face the challenge. This paper will examine the critical errors made by the UN during the Bosnian and Croatian crises and will propose possible solutions to this particular peacekeeping dilemma and ways that the UN can learn from their mistakes to benefit future peacekeeping missions.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s the world was shocked by the violent collapse of Yugoslavia. Conflict ravaged the area for nearly five years as state after state seceded from the Yugoslav union.

Tensions rose to the breaking point as Serbians, Croats, Muslims, and countless other ethnic groups began devastating wars with one another in an effort to carve out their own territories. Horrifying stories of ethnic cleansing and genocide began to reach the rest of the world only after it was too late to stop it. The United Nations had a golden opportunity to prevent the atrocities of the Yugoslav secessionist wars, yet failed to do so. This paper examines the shortcomings of the United Nations peacekeeping operations in two former Yugoslavian territories: Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

It is imperative to study the United Nation's actions during the Yugoslav crisis because there are many lessons to be learned from this unfortunate period of UN history. The first step is to identify the mistakes that were made in planning the Yugoslav peacekeeping missions. It is important to recognize solutions to the problems the UN had during these operations

so that they might be applied to future operations. Such experience is invaluable to the United Nations because there will always be more crises that the UN will be called upon to handle. The next time conflict erupts, the UN needs to be far better prepared to prevent the atrocities such as those seen in the Yugoslav crisis.

From the very beginning, the involvement of the United Nations in the former Yugoslavia was misguided. The United Nation's efforts in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina after the breakup of Yugoslavia were obviously well meant, but in the end, it is clear that they were not prepared, nor fully equipped to deal with the bloody civil wars occurring in those countries. A major problem with the UN's involvement in the former Yugoslavia was that the international community was divided in its opinion about what needed to be done in this problem area. Additionally, it was divided as to whose side it should take in the conflict. Along with these problems, seven other major errors are identified in this paper regarding the UN's actions in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The seven mistakes made by the UN were: early passivity on the part of the international community; letting the European Community (EC) take responsibility for the former Yugoslavia initially; denying peacekeeping troops to Bosnia at a crucial point in the conflict; the random nature of the mission plan for the area; the implementation of the Vance Plan in Croatia; delayed UN presence in Bosnia-Herzegovina; and making threats without force of action. Combined, these

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seven actions contributed to the eventual failure of the UN's peacekeeping mission in the former Yugoslavia and created one of the worst peacekeeping disasters in the United Nation's history.

While it is easy to see what could have been done better in hindsight, it is not always so easy to see clearly while in the midst of a crisis. This is why it is so important to come up with corrections for the UN's actions in the former Yugoslavia. This paper will discuss possible solutions to the UN's errors in order to determine what might be helpful in future operations. The most obvious correction is taking immediate action in a crisis. As will be shown, the United Nations failed to do this in the Yugoslav crisis, a mistake that cost a great deal. Another solution is to modify structural arrangements of the UN's internal organization. Systems of UN peacekeeping funding currently in place are lacking and therefore reduce the effectiveness of the missions. Changes in the payment system could help future operations to be more effective. Finally, a simple, yet helpful, solution to preventing future conflicts is to obtain a fundamental understanding of the cause of the Yugoslav conflict and what went wrong in the UN operation there. By doing this, we can gain invaluable knowledge that may prevent conflict from breaking out in other unstable regions.

BACKGROUND

The crisis in the former Yugoslavia began in 1990 when the ruling communist party collapsed amidst growing ethnic tensions and economic hardships. When the communist party collapsed, multi-party elections were held resulting in a Croat majority in the republican legislature. In turn, the Croat Nationalist party majority elected their leader, Franco Tudjman, as President of Croatia. Shortly thereafter, Serb populations in Croatia created their own parliament and declared themselves to be autonomous. Similar events occurred all over the former Yugoslavia. With the nation of Slovenia leading the way, many former Yugoslav republics began to declare independence. This provoked the Yugoslav National Army into action. The first goal of the Yugoslav army was to keep Yugoslavia united. Failing that, their second objective was to try and keep Serbian communities in the separate republics attached to the majority Serbian population in Serbia. The first signs of serious conflict occurred in Croatia when the Yugoslav National Army attempted to protect the seriously outnumbered Serbian minority there. Shortly after the first troubles appeared in Croatia, the country was engulfed in an all out civil war.

SEVEN MISTAKES MADE BY THE UN DURING THE CRISIS

While there were many flaws to the UN's operations in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the following seven critical

errors were the main causes of the UN's failures in the former Yugoslavia.

THE FIRST UN MISTAKE

The international community, in the form of the UN, sat by at the beginning of the crisis and did nothing. This was the first critical mistake made. One main reason for inaction was that the international community in general and the European community in particular, were more concerned with the turmoil created by the end of the Cold War at the time. The early signs of trouble in Yugoslavia were either overshadowed by the shakeup caused by the end of the Cold War, or not taken seriously by those who did notice the rumblings there. Many observers simply believed that the noise coming out of Yugoslavia was merely the result of the Communist Party's loss of power and that nothing serious would come of it. Also a factor in the overlooked tension of Yugoslavia was the West's (especially the United States') involvement in the Persian Gulf War. The United States was involved in the Gulf War until mid-1991, and the war there was dominating international interest and headlines. Also contributing to inaction at this time was the fact that many European populations have ties to many of the ethnic groups in the Balkans. With such ties present, many European countries were prejudiced in favor of one ethnic group or another, resulting in conflicting opinions within the UN as to the appropriate course of action. This circumstance made it next to impossible for the UN to react immediately, even had the international community been inclined to do so (Durch and Schear 1996, 200-230). This incapacity to act allowed the imminent crisis to erupt into a violent civil war. In fact, William J. Durch and James A. Schear go so far as to claim that "As a result, pressures that might have been dissipated by concerted international action early on were allowed to build to explosive levels" (1996, 199).

None of the major powers wanted the responsibility of handling the Yugoslav crisis, especially the United States. The United States had enough to deal with in handling the Persian Gulf War and did not want to engage in a protracted, violent struggle. Other European nations didn't relish the idea of being involved either, but they felt more obligated to deal with it because of their proximity to the conflict. Thus, the rest of the international community was more than happy to oblige when the European Community finally insisted on handling this conflict.

THE SECOND UN MISTAKE

Allowing the EC to take charge of the situation was the second big mistake made by the UN. The UN relied on Article 33, as well as Chapter 8, of the United Nations Charter to excuse itself from early intervention. These state that disputes can and should be handled locally or even regionally before being brought before the Security Council. Under the Charter, the UN acted legitimately in this crisis, but the end

result shows that in this instance, the UN ought to have adopted a different course of action.

The EC's role in Yugoslavia was bound to fail because its three main goals for Yugoslavia were to provide aid, to keep Yugoslavia united, (which was an outlook adopted by most of the international community), and to prevent conflict. The EC failed to understand that at that point, there was no possibility of keeping Yugoslavia together. With nationalist tendencies gathering steam among Muslims, Croats, and Serbs, the ethnic populations in Yugoslavia were already well past the 'conflict prevention' stage of the EC's plan. Once the EC realized this, they tried to switch tactics, but it was already too late. The EC had "...embarked upon the path of rhetoric rather than action" (Williams 2001, 275), a mistake that contributed to their failure. Amidst impending dissension in its ranks, the EC was finally forced to accept the fact that Yugoslavia was going to break up and that it was not equipped to handle the crisis. The EC then conceded and accepted the independence of Slovenia and Croatia early in 1992, and stepped down as the leading institution in this crisis.

THE THIRD AND FOURTH UN MISTAKES

The UN began to realize in the fall of 1991 that the European Community's efforts in Yugoslavia were ineffectual and the institution prepared to take action. The third and fourth mistakes in the Yugoslav operation were committed during this time period. Mistake number three, occurring in the early fall, was the embargo against Yugoslavia, voted in place by the UN. The embargo alone was not the mistake. If looked at in retrospect, however, the embargo shows that the UN had no clear plan of action to follow in Yugoslavia. The UN was witnessing the EC's failure in Yugoslavia, and the only action it took was an embargo. At that time, no other plans were made. The whole operation in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina came about in the same way. The operation was planned piece by piece when what was really needed was a full-scale plan of action right from the start.

The fourth mistake (and the second of that year) was made when Bosnia formally applied for independence in December of 1991. At the time of its application, the Bosnian government requested UN peacekeeping troops be sent to help alleviate the conflict that would inevitably ensue at Bosnia's secession. The request for peacekeeping troops was denied. The probable reason for the denial was that it was not a major concern to anyone (yet), as the conflict was at that time centered in Croatia, and was not alarming in Bosnia. This shortsightedness on the part of the UN proved to be a huge mistake. Conflict did indeed break out in Bosnia upon independence, a conflict which would rage, almost uncontrollably, from mid-1992 up through 1995.

THE FIFTH UN MISTAKE

With the EC's complete withdrawal from the crisis in early 1992, the UN was obligated to take full responsibility over the crisis in the former Yugoslavia. Early that same year, the UN

began to deploy its first members of its "peacekeeping" mission into Croatia. The force was named the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) and was created by order of the Security Council. UNPROFOR was to be "an interim arrangement to create conditions of peace and security required for the negotiation of an overall settlement of the Yugoslav crisis" (Security Council Resolution 743, February 21, 1992; see Durch and Schear 261).

Although it was intended to be a peacekeeping mission, Durch and Schear classify UNPROFOR as "...a precarious midpoint between total disengagement and forceful intervention, which raised the spectre of a Balkan quagmire and even competing interests" (1996, 206). In their book, Lawrence Ziring, Robert Riggs, and Jack Plano define a UN peacekeeping mission as "...a UN non-fighting field operation, usually involving military as well as civilian personnel, undertaken to maintain or restore peace in an area of conflict" (2000, 172). Ziring et al. consider UNPROFOR to be a peacekeeping mission (2000, 172) whereas William J. Durch notes in his essay that UNPROFOR is a "humanitarian intervention" (1996, 5). In the end, however, UNPROFOR seemed to be more like a multi-dimensional operation, having more and more tasks assigned to its mandate as the conflict raged on. Whatever its classification, under no circumstances can UNPROFOR be called a success. UNPROFOR first deployed into Croatia in 1992 and was implemented originally according to a strategy called the Vance Plan (named after its creator, former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance). The Vance Plan, in essence, was to create "safe zones", officially designated as United Nations Protected Areas (UNPAs). These zones were to be established in areas of heavy conflict and were designed mainly to remove the presence of the Serbian controlled Yugoslav National Army. The rest of the Vance Plan included demilitarizing these safe zones (removing armed forces as well as weapons), restoring a sense of normalcy to the safe zones and to allow people who had been driven out to return to their homes and neighborhoods without the threat of violence.

Operating according to the Vance Plan was the fifth identified error in judgment on the part of the UN. The Vance Plan failed for reasons similar to those that caused the EC's efforts to fail. The Vance Plan was solely focused on aid and creating small areas of reprieve from the turmoil. The only thing this plan did was to slap a Band-Aid over the wound without examining the wound or finding out where it came from. This strategy did not try to solve the underlying problems of the conflict; it only gave temporary respite from it. The Vance Plan created a situation where the UN dealt with the conflict not by stopping the violence but by trying to ease the burden on the innocent bystanders, a response that "...allowed the suffering to continue" (Higgins 1993, 469). UNPROFOR failed in Croatia eventually because its mandate had no teeth to it. In the beginning, it was fairly useful because it brought with it much needed aid and hope to the civilians in this war torn country. After the initial usefulness

wore off, however, it soon became apparent to all parties involved that the UN was not going to be able to solve the problem. After waiting for solutions that never came from the UN, the parties to the conflict in Croatia began to take the initiative on their own behalf. Time and again cease-fires were broken (by both sides), especially once they realized that the UN was going to do little, if anything, to stop them militarily. During 1993 a stalemate frustrated UN negotiators, as both sides refused to cooperate. The year 1993 was, in fact, characterized by stalemate, shaky cease-fire agreements, and subsequent violations of said agreements. The UN was not making headway in Croatia.

THE SIXTH UN MISTAKE

During the UN's preoccupation with Croatia, the situation in Bosnia flared up. UNPROFOR didn't even have a presence there until mid-1992, and even then it was only to provide aid and relief. In many ways, the situation in Bosnia was far more distressful than that in Croatia. This is true largely due to two factors. These were: Croatian dominance over Serbs in Croatia, and the addition of a third party to the conflict in Bosnia.

In Croatia, the Serb population was much smaller than that of the Serb population in Bosnia, leveling out the playing field a little in Bosnia. Also, Serbs in Croatia were forced to flee by the thousands to bordering countries including Bosnia, swelling the Serbian population there even more. The presence of a fairly large Muslim community in Bosnia also added to the chaos. As a result, each party to the conflict in Bosnia was forced to contend with two enemies instead of one. The fact that the tenuous situation in Bosnia was largely ignored and then only offered humanitarian aid is ironic. The area that needed the most help from the UN got the least. This is the sixth shortcoming of the UN's operations in Croatia/Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In the beginning UNPROFOR's deployment into Bosnia-Herzegovina had four major goals. One was to aid Sarajevo, unquestionably the hardest hit city in Bosnia. This city was also important because it was home to the Sarajevo airport, a necessity to fly in supplies and aid, as well as a route out of Bosnia for troops and civilians. Another goal of UNPROFOR-Bosnia-Herzegovina (UNPROFOR-BH) was the escort of humanitarian relief. This goal was much harder to achieve in Bosnia than in Croatia because the Bosnian Serbs were far more aggressive and far less cooperative than their counterparts in Croatia. The UN finally had to call on NATO to implement its humanitarian relief goal. This step was actually fairly successful for UNPROFOR-BH because the addition of NATO, along with its air strike authorization, gave the mission a little leverage over the conflicting parties. After continual trouble with Bosnian Serbs, UNPROFOR's mandate was expanded to include the creation of a no-fly zone which was to be monitored and enforced by NATO forces. Also included in the extended mandate in the spring of 1993 was the creation of 'safe zones' in major towns such as

Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Gorazde. The last goal at this time was to create weapons exclusions zones, and to try and implement a Muslim-Croat federation. This move was prompted by a major attack on Sarajevo by the Bosnian Serbs. Also a result of this action was the authorization of NATO to back up UNPROFOR-BH with air strikes if necessary. NATO complied and began to issue ultimatums to both parties. At this time NATO demanded that heavy artillery and weapons be pulled back to a certain distance from safe zones, and weapons were to be handed over to UNPROFOR personnel for safe-keeping. NATO also declared that failure to comply would result in air strikes. This action helped to create the weapons exclusions zones, and an alliance, albeit a tenuous one, was formed between the Muslims and Croats. At this point, it seemed as though the UN was finally headed in the right direction.

THE SEVENTH UN MISTAKE

Mistake number seven was right on the heels of these few UN successes. Necessary relief was still blocked by the Bosnian Serbs and not enough supplies were being brought in to ease the suffering of Bosnian civilians. Massive airdrops had to be executed, mainly by the United States. Also, weapons exclusions zones and UN safe areas began to be violated constantly by the Bosnian Serbs. The mistake made by the UN at this point was that NATO (authorized by the UN) continually threatened to conduct air strikes, but never followed through with these threats. By late 1993, the Serbs had heard NATO's threats so many times, always without result that they ceased to see NATO or the UN as a threat. This undermined their credibility and allowed the Serbs to do whatever they wanted. By early 1994, the Serbs had bombed a town, attacked major UN safe zones, and even taken members of the UN peace-keeping force hostage. This extreme behavior still failed to elicit a major air strike from NATO, although it did elicit a few minor strikes on weapons and military sites.

This last failure was largely due to the five permanent members of the Security Council. The Security Council hesitated to authorize major air strikes due to the veto power of the five permanent members. The United Kingdom, as well as France, would not authorize air strikes because of the large amount of ground troops each of them had contributed to UNPROFOR. The United Kingdom had around 3,000 peacekeepers on the ground while France had over 4,500 troops committed to UNPROFOR (Higgins 1993, 472). They would not risk the lives of their soldiers to punish the Bosnian Serbs. As a result, the UN failed to force the Bosnian Serbs into compliance.

1994 and 1995 were not very good years for UNPROFOR neither in Croatia nor Bosnia-Herzegovina. By mid-1995 the Croats in Croatia tired of waiting for a resolution from the UN and launched a major attack against the Serbs. The assault was so successful for them that they managed to drive hundreds of thousands of Serbs out of Croatia, winning huge territories in the process. This assault cut right through

UN safe zones, leaving civilian and UN casualties in its wake. The UN eventually had no choice but to ask the Croatian government for permission to safely evacuate the members of the UNPROFOR-Croatia mission. Permission was granted and the UN pulled its forces out and left. By mid-1994 the UN had tired of Bosnian Serb aggression and authorized major NATO air strikes against them. The United States, looking for a way to appease the public in time for the upcoming election, instigated major negotiations and solicited the help of Serbia's Slobodan Milosovic to bring the Bosnian Serbs to the table. Richard Holbrooke, then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State was sent to do the job, eventually arranging a cease-fire and hammering out an agreement with regards to the formation of the Bosnian state and its boundaries. An agreement was signed and took effect in November 1995. The UN formally approved this agreement and declared that a peacekeeping mission should remain behind to oversee the transition and prevent further conflict from erupting. However, this peacekeeping force was to be led and enforced by NATO. Some of UNPROFOR-BH's peacekeepers were left behind, but their command was transferred to NATO as well. The rest of UNPROFOR-BH was pulled out of the country.

Although 1995 saw the end of most of the conflict in former Yugoslavia, it was a dismal ending for the United Nation's peacekeeping missions. This is because the Croatians themselves ended the conflict in Croatia, and conflict was resolved in Bosnia-Herzegovina due to American intervention and NATO leadership. Neither UN operation helped bring about resolution. In fact, the failures of the UN in this mission probably prolonged the conflict.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The crisis in the former Yugoslavia taught the world many disturbing lessons. We learned that people are capable of committing horrendous atrocities over something as natural as ethnic diversity. We also learned that our institutions are not capable of coping with a crisis of enormous magnitude, a fact that is more than a little frightening. To prevent such a tragedy from occurring again, possible solutions need to be sought. There are dozens of routes that the UN could have taken during the Yugoslav crisis—some might have improved the outcome, others might have made the outcome worse, and yet others might have ended with the same results. Because it is impossible to actually go back and apply possible solutions to the crisis, it will never be known what the best options would be. However, using what is known about the crisis and applying hindsight, possible solutions to the next crisis can be created and analyzed before it actually erupts.

The best thing that the United Nations could have done in Yugoslavia (and should do in future conflicts) is to act early. Rabia Ali and Lawrence Lifschultz noted that the governments of the most prominent members of the UN—France, the United Kingdom, and the United States—wasted almost a

year "...engaged in a protracted, contentious, and in the end, sterile debate over the options available to stop the war" (1993, xxviii) while innocent people were dying in Bosnia. The UN should have responded to the threat sooner and put together a comprehensive plan to deal with the situation.

Another possible solution to the peacekeeping dilemma is to alter the structure of UN organization. Funding for all UN activities comes from the members themselves. The system is set up to be a fair scale of membership dues which should help fund peacekeeping operations. In reality, the system of peacekeeping funding is flawed and many scholars, such as Rosalyn Higgins, see this as a major contributor to the failings of the UN in the former Yugoslavia (1993, 477-489). As pointed out by Higgins, peacekeeping operations are to be funded through regular dues memberships, but many countries fail to pay their dues. Some of the largest members of the UN (such as the Russian Federation) had failed to pay their allocated portion of the costs for UNPROFOR as of February 1993 (1993, 478). Naturally, a delay in payments harms the ability of the UN to successfully pull together an operation. While it is unlikely that there will be any changes to the permanent membership of the UN Security Council, perhaps the threat of loss of that membership might cause the five members to pick up their share of the burden. Conversely, the possibility of gaining a permanent seat on the Security Council might be incentive for the second-tier nations to pick up some extra slack. Either way, the shakeup could only benefit the UN and its peacekeeping activities.

A last possible solution considered in this paper is to analyze and understand the background of the conflict and the problems the UN had in containing the conflict. A large part of what happened in Yugoslavia in the early 1990's was preventable. The UN underestimated the seriousness of the conflict. Additionally, the nature of the conflict was imperfectly understood by the UN. Therefore, the UN was unable to respond appropriately to the situation. To prevent the outbreak of future similar conflicts (or to at least contain them before they get out of control), more research needs to be done on the Yugoslav case. The situation itself needs to be examined as well as the actions of the UN and the other major players in the conflict. Future research should take the lessons learned from this analysis and apply them to common theories of International Relations, such as Realism and Institutionalism, in an effort to establish feasible solutions to future potential conflicts.

CONCLUSIONS

The seven major mistakes made by the UN in this conflict are clear. Almost everything it did in this operation was wrong. The missions were so flawed that they have even been referred to as "the endless sequel of mistakes..." (Thompson 1993, 167). This operation did not even manage to meet even its most basic goal—to provide humanitarian relief. The situation was so bad that in a given month, the UN had only

been able to provide Bosnian civilians with 18 percent of the necessary food (O'Ballance 1995, 236). While the UN was sitting back and watching the conflict grow, it should have leapt to action. When the EC was fumbling the crisis in Croatia, the UN should have jumped right in full force instead of taking baby steps that were hardly significant. The UN needed to come up with a full scale plan to help change the situation in Croatia instead of implementing a plan that did nothing to solve the real problem (ethnic tension and disputes over territory and systems of governance.) The early days of the conflict should have seen the UN sending aid to all areas of the former Yugoslavia instead of focusing on one area at a time. While the UN was giving Croatia conflict control, it should have also been giving Bosnia conflict prevention. If the UN had done so early on, the crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina would have been far less destructive. The UN should have also been prepared to back up its declarations and threats with force or should have not threatened force at all. It has been said that "...international intervention in local conflicts cannot be effective without credible threat of force and resolve to use it (Silovic 2000, 157). The threatened use of force without backing it up caused the parties in the conflict to dismiss and undermine UNPROFOR-BH's credibility, and by extension, NATO's and the UN's.

It seems that at all times during this crisis, the UN remained one step behind the game. The delay at the very beginning of the crisis created a whole chain of mishaps that caused the UN to be always lagging behind. The members of the United Nations allowed their local politics and their apathy to get the best of them. In her book, Phyllis Bennis sums up the problem nicely:

The bottom line of the Bosnian policy of the Northern powers-of France, Britain, but most especially the U.S.-was to satisfy domestic political demands and appear to be "doing something" while in fact doing as little as possible and risking even less. The UN, whose strategic involvement was controlled largely by those three countries, would prove useful for both (142).

This statement clearly supports the fact that, in the beginning, nobody cared enough about the people in the former Yugoslavia to help them. When the international community realized that this conflict wasn't going to go away, it tried to pawn off its duties and responsibilities to a group (the EC) that could at once not afford to refuse the assignment, but wasn't equipped to handle a conflict of this magnitude. Although this paper has focused mainly on the United Nation's shortcomings in the Croatian/Bosnian conflict, the UN is not solely to blame. All of the major world powers can equally share the blame, on an individual basis, with the United Nations, because the UN is often limited by its members and their individual agendas.

The Yugoslav case is not just an unfortunate episode in the world's history. It is an important example of what can happen when the world underestimates and ignores a region simply because it has been deemed politically and economi-

cally irrelevant. The Yugoslav case also provides invaluable information and lessons that the UN needs to learn so that future conflicts can be prevented or rapidly resolved. This paper has critically examined the UN's actions during the Yugoslav crisis, not for the sake of criticizing the UN, but with the hopes that analyzing this case will lead to further research and will generate more potential solutions so that nothing so horrendous as Yugoslavia will ever take place again.

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