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Puzzled by 2012 Peace Prize

By Peter Rutland

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The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union has brought both praise and puzzlement. The International Crisis Group lauded the EU as "one of the greatest conflict resolution mechanisms ever devised." Others questioned why a body whose economic policies are associated with political turmoil and social unrest in Greece and Spain should be singled out for promoting peace.

The prize is awarded by a committee nominated by the Norwegian parliament. Critics were quick to argue that the decision was driven by purely political considerations, that is, by the desire to help the EU ride out the severe crisis facing its common currency. They also pointed to the hypocrisy of Norway praising a body that Norwegian citizens have twice voted against joining.

Europe is certainly a more peaceful place today than at any time in its past, but does the EU deserve all the credit for this? Defenders of the committee's decision argue that the EU has ended the centuries-old proclivity of European states to invade each other. It's true that most of Europe has enjoyed six decades without war. But it was the Cold War, not the Brussels

bureaucracy, that created and maintained the peace in Europe.

The United States and the Soviet Union physically occupied the Continent in 1945, dismantled its armies and took responsibility for providing security in their respective halves of the continent. NATO and the Warsaw Pact were in place well before the Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community was signed in 1957. In subsequent years, peace was preserved thanks to the deployment of nuclear weapons and the deterrence of Mutually Assured Destruction.

The EU certainly deserves credit for integrating the economies of its member countries and cultivating a spirit of joint endeavor so that when the Cold War ended in the late 1980s, a return to a 19th-century Europe of heavily militarized states threatening war with each other was inconceivable. But this was possible only because European states had already been stripped of their war-making functions for nearly half a century.

The enlargement of the EU into Eastern Europe over the past decade is also lauded for extending the zone of peace and stability into the former Soviet bloc. The prospect of EU entry was indeed important in tamping down nationalist conflict in Slovakia and Romania, both of which were home to Hungarian minorities eager to defend their cultural rights.

But these positive achievements have to be balanced against the military conflict in Yugoslavia during the late 1990s, which left more than 100,000 dead. Not only did the EU fail to prevent the conflict, but you could also argue that the precipitate recognition of the independence of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina by Germany and others helped accelerate the violence.

From 1991 to 1995, it was the EU and United Nations that played the leading role in efforts to end the fighting. But they failed in that task, showing the structural inability of the EU to act decisively to bring about peace. This culminated in the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995, when 7,000 men and boys died at the hands of Serbian forces. It was only the subsequent U.S.-led NATO intervention that ended the fighting and imposed a peace that has held to the present. A similar cycle played out in Kosovo over the next four years, which festered until NATO military action brought closure in 1999.

The EU has also failed to bring about a peaceful resolution to the secessionist conflicts in Moldova, Azerbaijan and Georgia. True, these conflicts present a daunting challenge for peacemakers, whose task is complicated by Russia's heavy-handed presence in these regions. But the Moldova conflict is far from intractable, and the EU's failure to engineer a peace in this small, impoverished country is disappointing. Likewise, the EU accepted the divided island of Cyprus as a member state, much to Turkey's annoyance. One can only assume that places like Moldova and Cyprus are not on Oslo's radar screen.

In awarding the peace prize to the EU, the Norwegian Nobel committee is effectively erasing the Yugoslav wars and the post-Soviet conflicts from the historical record. The granting of the prize to the EU may be good politics, but it is bad history.

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