

The Faces of Peaceful Reintegration

Stories of Ordinary People
in Extraordinary Times

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Introduction

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Dear readers,

I learned to appreciate the value of peace early on in life, since I myself was a child refugee in Germany. I was educated in Germany, and during my university studies I got a scholarship from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The Foundation holds peace as one of its fundamental values, together with other social democratic values such as freedom, justice and solidarity. I have been working in Croatia for the Foundation for some time. I am happy that a part of my work is related to Vukovar. That city, for me, represents a place of peace above all. The peaceful reintegration process has enabled the return of many families to the region. I personally did not return to the city I left in the 1990s. I know from personal experience that returning after a war is a great challenge, for which one has to be strong. That is why I think that the people in Podunavlje are strong, brave and persistent. Here, you will read seven stories from such people. What really worries me today is the fact that young people from these parts are leaving in search of a better future. I don't blame them, but I am saddened by this. I wonder who will nurture the culture of peace in the future.

There are two reasons why the 15th of January is not just another day on the calendar: why it is a day when we celebrate PEACE. First, this day marks the date when the Republic of Croatia gained international recognition. Secondly, this date marks the formal conclusion of the peaceful reintegration process of the Croatian Podunavlje region into the Republic of Croatia. It was not enough just to put together a peace declaration. Peace has to be maintained, nurtured, and looked after! The citizens of Vukovar witnessed the worst of the war atrocities, had been coping with trauma connected to their losses – human and material, and had been enduring the rebuilding of their community. It became clear during the process that the rebuilding of a community required the engagement of all citizens and institutions. It needs dialogue, understanding, communication, being in tune with new trends, and the recognition of new achievements. Sometimes we don't manage to find the correct path and the right words, but this is the process that opens space for dialogue and peaceful reintegration. It must be noted that this is the peace operation in the Republic of Croatia that the UN considers the most successful. Peaceful reintegration is still not understood properly nor is it accepted by the public, although it has been said repeatedly that it could be an example for others: a good solution to resolving new conflicts in the world.

Based on this, we have noted the experiences of those citizens of Vukovar; those who were the direct participants in this process. We have been working to show that this is the way to build lasting peace. It is the path that offers hope for a better society and a more stable community.

1

Greetings

Gorana Kušić



Gorana Kušić was six years old in the summer of 1991. Her street in Sotin, a village on the outskirts of Vukovar, where she was born and her parents too, was the main spot for children to play. It was a dead-end street with little to no traffic where around thirty children in the neighbourhood would safely play. But not that summer. There were only around four children in the whole village that summer. There was nine-year-old Maja, ten-year-old Boris, Gorana, and her fifteen-year-old brother.

Gorana had no idea what was coming, and neither did her parents. If they had, they would have probably left earlier. That August, it looked as if it was raining lit cigarette butts. Those were bombs from airplanes! They started spending their days in the basement shelter. Gorana found it exciting, but her parents realised that this was not going to turn out well. They decided to leave. They took the long and roundabout road to their family in the quiet town of Battenberg, Germany. Her father worked on a construction site. Her mother couldn't find work, but they lived well on the one salary. Her brother continued his education and Gorana started primary school. With time, she was bilingual in German and Croatian. She had made friends and came to love Battenberg. The whole family wanted to stay, but they were forced to leave in 1997. Germany didn't want to extend their stay.

They packed up their lives and drove their car and a big caravan behind it to Medulin, to their father's older sister who had lost both sons in the war on the 19th of November 1991 in the Borovo factory housing complex. Gorana hadn't experienced leaving Vukovar as something frightening because she was too small, but leaving Germany was different. That was the only life that she had known and she liked it. However, she adapted well to Medulin, and life went on. At the end of 1997 they went to see how things were looking in Vukovar and Sotin. They entered at dusk. There were no houses on the sides of the road. It was as if there had never been anything there. Gorana sat in the back of the car and heard her father crying for the first time in her life. Her parents were 39 years old in 1991. Their entire lives were in those streets, and those lives were destroyed by the war.

Their house had been looted, but it was still intact. It was the only house they had. Maybe things were better in other places, but this belonged to them. They put in a request for reconstruction. Gorana's mother got an offer to be a secretary in a civil service department. Finally, she had a job again.

This would be her first job since the war started. Her father could go back to his job in the Borovo factory. The decision had been made for them: they were going back.

Gorana started seventh grade in Vukovar. There were fewer than ten children in her grade at the start of the school year. The ground floor was where the Serbian curriculum was taught, and the Croatian curriculum was taught on the first floor. Despite this, the kids took the bus together. The boys played football since there weren't enough players otherwise. Gorana, however, was isolated from hanging out with friends after school in her village. The 10-km distance from Vukovar to her village cut her off from everything. She doesn't remember the sun shining even once in that first year when she commuted from Sotin to Vukovar for school. It was always grim and dark. The sun had shone in Germany and in Medulin, but not in this barren land. Perhaps it would only in the summers...by the Danube. Gorana thought in German, and spoke in the pre-war Vukovar tongue, which no one would now speak. The language was divided into Serbian and Croatian, and there was no space for a common tongue. She had to think about how she would speak, especially in Sotin where a young person must be the first to greet an elder. 'Ciao!' or 'Hiya!' were formerly acceptable words for a greeting, but not anymore. These words now belonged to the Serbs. Croats could say 'God be with you'. Her parents said that 'good morning,' 'good day,' or 'good evening' were the safest options.

Things looked up after she started secondary school. It was the year 2000, a new century, and many children had returned to Vukovar. The Croatian classes were now a normal size, her friend group expanded, and the school work was interesting. Her Croatian became more formal. She saw less of her Serb friends because the schools were now in different buildings and the places where they went out were separated...and the languages too.

Gorana graduated from the University of Zadar. She taught German in Vukovar's schools. She is happy with her current job in the Municipal Museum in Vukovar, and she likes her flat, which overlooks the Danube. When she walks down Vukovar's streets and meets someone from her lovely group of friends, which she has built over the years, she thinks: if the town were as destroyed as it had been in 1998, and she had known all these people, she wouldn't have found it grim. She would have said hello to them with all the diverse greetings she knew.



Why do we Find Peace Less Interesting Than War?

Gordan Bosanac

I could almost bet that most of the readers of this publication will be familiar with the military operation known as “Oluja” (Operation Storm in English*). Do you know of anyone amongst your friends, family, or acquaintances who doesn’t know what Oluja stands for? I am also sure that the majority of your acquaintances have never heard of the process of peaceful reintegration of the Podunavlje region (Eastern Slavonia). While the Republic of Croatia liberated the occupied regions in the Oluja military operation, the process of peaceful reintegration achieved the same thing in the east of the country - only without bullets being fired, without the loss of human life and without causing damage across the occupied area. Isn’t then peaceful reintegration a more successful ‘operation’ than Oluja? Why do we not celebrate peaceful reintegration as passionately as we do Oluja? Isn’t it an incredible success to reintegrate occupied territories by agreement rather than by war? Isn’t it so much more difficult to win back occupied regions by agreement than by war? And who were the people who participated and invested themselves into making sure that agreement was the tool for the country’s liberation rather than war? Do you know their names? If you do, you’re one of the few people interested in the most successful and peaceful anti-war stories in Croatia’s history.

But why is this so? Why do we find war more compelling than peace? Why do we generally remember it for longer and with more force when someone hurts us rather than when they help us? The secret lies in the banality and brutality of violence, and its particularly destructive effect on human beings. Every act of violence leaves a great trace on us. The slap you got from your parents, or a former friend, remains in your memory for much longer than all the care and softness those people might have also shown. Experiencing violence changes our reality. We remember it deeply and are afraid it might happen again. At the same time, we occasionally enjoy violence because we think it resolves problems much more quickly and efficiently. What’s wrong with that? Violence leaves deep wounds that take years to heal. As opposed to violence, non-violence and care for another are something we take for granted. It’s part of our daily life. Non-violence is the basic pre-condition for our functioning as human beings. They say that people stop being human through violence. This is precisely why it is important to celebrate non-violence, and this is why we must start being more mesmerized by non-violence than violence. Because although it appears to be the case, non-violence is not a given. It takes constant work. The work of peaceful integration in 1990s was courageous and demanding.

*Operation Storm was the last major military operation of the Croatian War of Independence in August 1995. The operation was launched to restore Croatian control of 10,400 square kilometres of territory, representing 18.4% of the territory it claimed under the control of the Republic of Serbian Krajina.

2

A Long Way Back Home

Ivan Hubalek



It was on the 19th of August 1996 when Ivan Hubalek came back to Vukovar, after leaving in January 1991. More accurately, he had not been back to the city of his birth since the 18th of January 1991. Ivan likes to know exactly what happened and when, so he regularly writes down dates, places and factual descriptions of events into his computer. He knows that memory is unreliable, even though it still serves him perfectly well, in his 78th year of life. On that day, the 18th of January, he was arrested and taken from Vukovar to a concentration camp in Srijemska Mitrovica. He had expected something like that to happen after the town was occupied - either he was going to get arrested or shot. There was often no other option for men who did not want to leave a besieged city. There was no other option for his wife either. They were both taken to the camp. Only a few months earlier, he'd had no inkling of any of this. He was a mechanical engineer in a managerial position at the Borovo factory, and he also worked as a lecturer at the technical school. When fewer students started to turn up for school in 1991, he didn't understand what was happening. His work relationships were good, as usual, and he didn't notice that the workers were leaving. At least, they weren't leaving the machinery unit where he worked. It was only in June that he realised that hard times were coming.

When he returned on the 19th of August 1996, accompanied by the UNTAES (United Nations Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium), they went for talks at the Borovo factory. His notes read: "The first meeting with the Borovo representatives from the occupied territory." Ivan was one of the representatives of the Borovo factory, along with two others, and another three people were noted from the Borovo holding. Ivan was the assistant director of the organisation of returnees to Vukovar at the time. They were not really talks, he says. There was nothing to negotiate. It was about agreeing on the takeover of the factory.

He knew what he might find. He had remained in Vukovar "until the bitter end." He knew what the millions of shells had done to the city. Still, as they arrived at the Trpinje road, he didn't know where they were. He was five minutes away from the factory he'd worked at, but he couldn't recognise where he was. It was a wasteland.

They met their former Borovo colleagues at the Danube Hotel. The talks were correct and concrete. They talked about the state of the equipment, the infrastructure, the workers and jobs, and about production.

He had only been back in Koprivnica, his post war home where he had settled with his family, for only a few hours after returning from Vukovar that evening when the phone rang. It was the wife of a colleague with whom he'd gone to Vukovar. "Ivo, how are you?" she asked. "I'm fine, why?" Ivan replied. "My husband is feeling very bad. They poisoned you today." Ivan didn't believe in such a possibility. He knew that it was her stress talking. He had felt it too.

Seven months later, on the 21st of April 1997, he went inside Borovo and looked around the factory. That former giant looked defeated, but it was still better than the rest of the city. The most crumbled buildings had been removed in the preceding years. Some of the roofs and windows had been fixed. There was some production going on. The factory had been so amply equipped when it was at full capacity that even after all the destruction enough machines had remained to keep production going, at least for footwear and v-belts. It was the time of big preparations. It was time for the return of the new-old management. They were planning basic renovations, job positions, and there were hopes for new investment.

Six months later Ivan moved to the Borovo Hotel for single people and went to work from there every day until 2000. That year, his wife joined him and they moved into a house.

Peaceful reintegration, for Ivan, means exactly that: returning home and returning to Borovo...although neither the town nor the factory will ever be the same again.

How did we get to Peaceful Reintegration?

Gordan Bosanac

There is no doubt that Operation Storm (Oluja) made a significant change to the military relations in our country. In the wake of that victory, plans were apparently being made to liberate the occupied territories in the east of the country. The operation was to be called 'Standing Long Jump'. Nevertheless, the authorities gave up on military intervention and started talking about liberating the region peacefully with the help of the UN, and the tools of talks, negotiations, and agreement between the opposing sides. Those who had until recently been ready to shoot each other were now sitting down at a table together. Formally, the process of peaceful reintegration lasted from the 15th of January 1996 until the 15th of July 1998. Oluja lasted a mere four days, while the peaceful reintegration process took over two years. The talks resulted in the whole territory being returned to the Republic of Croatia and let's underline this - there was no loss of human life, no war damage and no new migrations. The new, peaceful direction was a consequence of several factors. Oluja altered the existing power relationships. It was in no one's interest to create new victims, new destruction, and new lines of refugees. The international community was decisive and ready to offer clear support towards a process of peaceful negotiations. The warring sides decided to give talking a chance.



3

Oluja Child

Sladana Trbulin



When Slađana Trbulin takes a break in Banija on her way to the coast in the summer, the place where she had lived for the first ten years of her life, she wonders what life might have been like had the war not happened: the war that had marked her family and the region forever. She would have probably studied in Zagreb and lived somewhere between Zagreb and Sisak. She was born in Sisak. Even if her parents had been left without jobs at the Sisak iron factory, they would have had a more dignified life. They would have lived in their house in Kostreši. They would not have been renting. They would have had their own land, and not have had to work as day labourers. There would have been light at home, tractors would be turning over the soil, and children would have stopped to sip fresh well water on the hot summer days while taking a break from their games. Sadly, Banija is empty now; barren and derelict just like their village. It had all looked so big before, and now it seems so small. The world of our childhood shrinks as we grow, but that's not what did it. It was Oluja, the military operation. She feels hurt when people tell her that they want to leave. Her family didn't want to leave. They had to flee to avoid death. They ran as hard as they could while their breaths were full of fear and uncertainty.

Slađana remembers it in fragments. The whole family had gathered at her maternal grandparents' house. They were stacking up hay. Slađana had tied her grandmother's shawl around her head. In the early morning of the 5th of August 1995, they were awakened by gunshots. Grandma packed up a ham and they walked, not knowing where they were going or how long they might be gone. They watched from the hill as everything they had left behind was in flames. They did not know then that they had left behind their happy times. They travelled for two weeks through Bosnia and Hercegovina to Serbia. They stopped in Kraljevo, in a sports hall full of people from Banija. Her father was barefoot, in shorts and a white t-shirt, reading the newspapers on the stairs, when the army came to recruit all men over 18. They sent him to Erdut, where he distributed food to the soldiers. Slađana, her mother and brother arrived in Bršadin village at the very end of 1995 to be closer to him.

Slađana carried on school in the Borovo housing complex. She was a timid, obedient child; aware that she was there by chance. She felt that she didn't belong there

and unaccepted. Her mother took care of her and her brother, and occasionally took on badly paid jobs. They moved often. During the times of peaceful reintegration, she mostly remembers Franjo Tuđman's voice when he arrived in Vukovar on the Peace Train. He spoke of forgiveness, reconciliation and cooperation. She didn't know why she felt the way she did. No one had said anything to her, but she didn't trust him. Her family had hoped they'd return to Banija, but they were entitled to 5000 kuna for the reconstruction of their house. Without that, they wouldn't have had a way to survive. The village was deserted. "I could invest in the house and then hang myself on the first tree I find," was how her father ended that conversation. Perhaps where they were living now wasn't the best of places, but it was better than Banija.

That's the difference between peaceful reintegration and a military operation.

Later on, as she read about peaceful reintegration and talking to people, Slađana saw that it had been the right start. However, it was not a completed process. "It starts well, but then it all goes back to square one," she says. One example of this was the loud protests against Cyrillic signposts being put up and their violent removal. Another example was connected to schooling. She could not decide which school to enrol her children in. As well, there was the time when the Intercultural School Dunav Project failed. This was a project where students were to study together, regardless of their ethnic origin, about the shared cultural heritage of all of Vukovar's people. She was also judged for her Serbian accent and her Croatian pronunciation. Sometimes people have said that it would have been better if Oluja had taken place in Podunavlje (Eastern Slavonia). Slađana considers herself to be a child of Oluja, and she knows well what a tragedy that is.



How was Peaceful Reintegration Implemented?

Gordan Bosanac



When you're preparing a military offensive, you work out war plans, ensure funds, develop tactics and strategies. You buy weapons, get armed and recruit soldiers. What do you do when you're starting peaceful reintegration? Almost none of the above except that you have faith in the process and try to leave your prejudices and interests aside. You start to talk. And to listen. Peaceful reintegration was founded precisely on talks, agreements, negotiations, but also on listening. It wasn't only the politicians doing the talking. Ordinary people who had to start forgiving and living side by side also had to talk to each other - after everything they had experienced. People from both sides of the conflict had to work together again in hospitals, the police and at the city hall. Many civic organisations also joined the listening and the talking. The aim was to build trust between people again so that they could coexist. One of the first steps was the demilitarisation of the entire occupied area. It was important to remove the army - precisely so that people would feel safer. Demilitarisation meant that no type of weapons, explosives or any other kind of military equipment could be owned by anyone who lived in the region. Law and order were maintained by the transitional police forces comprised of the two previously conflicting sides, and the UN. Mine clearance also started, as well as pilot projects for the return of the population back to their homes. The Serb side was given the opportunity to choose its legitimate representatives in the local government bodies. The Croatian kuna was introduced as the official currency. The first pensions were paid out in that currency. The motorway was opened-up. The City of Vukovar became part of the telephone network of the Republic of Croatia. The border crossing into Hungary became functional. Many will remember the opening of Žika's Market on the Osijek - Vukovar Road, where Serbs and Croats met and traded important daily items. All currencies were accepted at the market.

4

A Time of Big Hopes

Jakica i Duško Simić



Jakica and Duško Šimić were on the island of Korčula watching a Croatian TV report on Vukovar. The news was positive. They heard that when the Croatian Podunavlje region reintegrates into the constitutional and legislative order of the Republic of Croatia, things will blossom there. New jobs would become available. Salaries will go up. There'll be an abundance of everything. That's what the journalists said, and they decided to believe it. Every war is followed by a time of big hopes.

"Great, I'll pack my bag. I'm going to this amazing Slavonija," Duško told Jakica. They had nothing to lose. They had tried living in Belgrade. It hadn't worked. They tried Korčula. The same thing happened. They had miserable jobs. They were merely surviving with no future. It was September 1997. The woman who sold him his bus ticket told him that he was travelling to 'unknown terrains.' Bus lines towards this part of the country had only just been established. He arrived in a city in chaos. Everyone was talking about reintegration. No one knew what to expect. The main topic of conversation was whether to stay or leave. A portion of the population had already packed up and moved to Serbia. Duško was going door to door looking for a job in a city where he knew no one. Duško is from Knin, and Jakica is from Korčula. They met at the end of the 1980s when they were both law students in Split. When the war started, Duško transferred his studies to Belgrade. At the beginning of 1992, Jakica's new Croatian passport was among the first ones to cross the Serbian border. She visited him regularly over the years, and when they both graduated, they started a life together in Belgrade. From what he earned as an apprentice in a law firm, Duško could cover a fifth of his monthly rent. Jakica worked illegally as a cook and cleaner. The little that they earned was gulped down by inflation. Duško couldn't get Serbian citizenship, which would have enabled him to look for better jobs. In addition to all this, Arkan's paramilitaries were recruiting refugees from Croatia, especially after Operation Oluja, and sending them to Eastern Slavonia. Duško and Jakica didn't want to emigrate abroad because they thought that their only job options would be manual labour. So, they decided to try to build a better life in Croatia. Duško left for Croatia in early 1997 on a UN convoy. He was the only person under 70 on the bus, and the only person whose luggage consisted entirely of books. This was all that he owned. He heard a woman behind him say: "We're not a great loss, but this young man is going to be slaughtered as soon as he steps off the bus." Even though he felt uneasy, he relaxed after seeing Serb and

Croat border guards chatting and exchanging cartons of cigarettes. Korčula was no better. They were just as miserable there. Jakica worked for 1200 kuna per month as a night guard for various businesses. Duško gave private lessons to children, and could not find a job. The islanders whispered about that couple.

And then, they saw the report about Vukovar. There really was work available. Duško could choose his job, and he found one at an NGO, the Norwegian Refugee Council. When they told him that his salary would be "fifteen hundred", he hadn't worked out how much that might be until his first payment. Until then, they had only handled small banknotes, which were all paid in cash. He gave legal advice at the Council; mostly to Serb citizens who could not get Croatian citizenship if they were born outside Croatia, even if they had lived their whole life in Croatia. Many of those living in the border area had been born in places that were now outside Croatia's border. He was also helping Croats who were trying to get their property back.

After a few months of knocking on doors, Jakica too came upon a job as a secretary in a secondary school. Even though this was a city full of mud, ruins and bare trees, they were doing better than were in Korčula and Belgrade. The atmosphere in the city was healthier back then compared to today. Duško remembers: "I had a feeling that everyone was a bit tense and cautious, but they avoided saying things openly. As if they were measuring each other's power calmly. Those who had stayed wanted to remain in the city. Those who had come back wanted to start their lives again. Those are strong motivational factors, and the condition for survival is that some things are better not talked about." Jakica and Duško had an easier life there. They didn't know any residents that stayed behind or that came back as returnees. That meant no one had any resentment towards them, and they didn't hold any resentment towards others. They didn't know if they might stay in Vukovar for a few months or a few years. They have been here in this city on the Danube for 24 years now, with grown up daughters who were born here. "The peaceful reintegration programme changed our lives completely. I'm sorry that it wasn't like this in my home town of Knin where people couldn't choose whether to stay or leave. If there had been a peaceful reintegration process in Knin, I wouldn't not have celebrated my graduation anniversary in Belgrade. Most of my high school friends lived there. Of around a hundred of them, only four come from Croatia. Three from Knin, and me... from Vukovar."

We Integrated the Territory, but What About the People?

Gordan Bosanac

Peaceful integration officially ended on the 15th of July 1998. The occupied territory was under the complete rule of the Republic of Croatia. But have the people made their peace with each other? Today, almost 23 years later, when we hear about interethnic incidents, it is most often related to the City of Vukovar. Primary and secondary schools, as well as kindergartens, have remained divided along national lines to this day. They say that everyone knows which bar is 'Serb' or 'Croat'. Equally, many people are leaving Vukovar - especially the young. They cannot see any future there, even though homes have been rebuilt. On the other hand, Vukovar has become symbolized as a city victimized by war, and we commemorate this only by marking the fall of Vukovar. So, we remember the war operations again. But in Vukovar, as well as the whole of Eastern Slavonia, there are still people who have the will and desire to revitalise the region, and make it one of the more vibrant parts of the country. The people who live here especially deserve this, and this is why it's important to invest in people. Returning the land, without ensuring continuing support for the people who have all lived through some of the biggest war traumas, is not the point of peaceful reintegration. Peace building means investing in people daily. That process doesn't end on some symbolic date. This kind of investing in people has been missing in this case. Discussing who is a Croat and who is a Serb overshadows the much more important narrative of coexistence.



5

Trusting a New Beginning

Marija Molnar



Marija Molnar led a pleasant and quiet life as the process for a peaceful reintegration was nearing its end, she says. She was in her late twenties, and was successful at her job as music director at Radio Vinkovci. She went to concerts, and reported on cultural and social events. She was only interested in politics inasmuch as it was relevant to her life. Then she made the decision to change it all. Peaceful reintegration had brought back Croatian Radio Vukovar to the city and Marija was invited to join the team. There was no doubt in her mind about what her decision would be. She knew that there would be plenty of work for everyone in Vukovar, that institutions and society would have to be rebuilt, as well as houses and lives. She wanted to roll up her sleeves and participate in this new beginning. So, she went to Vukovar guided by ideals and optimism, as if she were volunteering in a youth action. When Marija started making occasional visits to Vukovar in 1996 everything seemed unreal. The city was only some twenty kilometres from Vinkovci, but she was more shocked than she might have been had she travelled to Kathmandu. She felt as if she were walking on a film set, among extras. Or as if she'd landed on a crater of the moon. The people looked mouldy, as if the dust of the ruined city had entered their bodies.

Some of the first images she remembers were mounds of dirt everywhere, trees growing out of houses and flats (even from the eighth floor of a building), and a mother and son walking past in shabby clothes with a Dalmatian dog on a lead. Strangely, it was the most beautiful dog she'd ever seen. That dog was an image of hope for her. The reconstruction of the city started a year later and everything was turned into a massive building site. Only a year after that, at the beginning of 1998, Marija started working at Croatian Radio Vukovar. Marija thinks that the media played an important role in the process of implementing peaceful reintegration and that they did a good job. Croatian Radio Vukovar hosted a daily programme called Returnee Radio, which featured many guests and where questions that were important to the people of Vukovar were answered. "People trusted us," says Marija. She remembers a large graffiti mural that stood on a building in the city centre. "This is Croatia" was written in Cyrillic. She liked this mix, as if it were a symbol of where they were and that there was room for all.

She worked constantly. It was hard and exciting. The city was being rebuilt, institutions were working again, one delegation after another was always visiting. She spent time with foreign volunteers and local activists.

She has remained friends to this day with her Serb colleagues, whom she'd met back then. It was an intense time. She would hear questions like: "How can you go to coffee with *him*?" She paid no attention to such remarks and didn't care which bars she went to, *theirs* or *ours*. She spent her time with people she liked. Her eyes were bright. She had trust and growing hope, like when a bright day is dawning. Through her collaboration with activists, she took part in education programmes on peace, forgiveness and facing the past. That was what peaceful reintegration meant for her: a tireless rebuilding process of both people and housing. When the day came when the building was done, she was sure that Vukovar would become a world centre for peace studies; or at least a world centre for war and peace research. The horror experienced by the people would be transformed into a lesson that would serve everyone. Goodness would grow out of this bloody terrain, and peaceful reintegration would be celebrated as a holiday because peace should be celebrated. "After everything that has happened, to implement reintegration without a single bullet being shot, without a single fight, that is a huge accomplishment," says Marija. Even though a number of highly competent people left to go abroad some years after the peaceful reintegration was over, Marija remembers that the city was moving in the right direction. Much had been rebuilt, some factories were working again, people from other parts of the country moved to Vukovar, there were jobs, new *mixed marriages* were no longer spoken of in whispers, and there were no interethnic conflicts. The city was safe. Marija remembers an image of the mayoral candidate Željko Sabo. The city square was packed, live music was playing, people were dancing in a large circle dance, Serbs and Croats were together, and Sabo with them. Everyone was dancing joyfully. It doesn't matter what her opinion was of Sabo as a mayor. Marija was fascinated by his ability to connect people by evoking the memory of the idyllic pre-war life in Vukovar.

That circle dance was like a surreal film scene that takes place before a catastrophe hits. Not long after that, new protests started, the removal of Cyrillic signposts began, ethnic provocations erupted; relationships started to get tense, and some were broken. Marija says that a beautiful town had been built, but that it was again like a film set. This time though there was no enthusiasm about a new beginning. Young people were leaving, there were no jobs, and the divisions hadn't faded away. Vukovar didn't become the world centre for peace.



How can we Implement Peaceful Reintegration Today?

Gordan Bosanac



Even though the peaceful reintegration process formally ended on the 15th of July 1998, there is no doubt that it is still active. One of the approaches to post-war peace building is also investing in the economic recuperation and development of the integrated area. If there are no jobs, people will soon leave to look for a better life. But economic recovery isn't enough. Building coexistence is of key importance. This coexistence is built less by state institutions, and mostly by civil society organisations. Self-organised citizens know best what is happening in small local communities and how to work on a common future rather than constantly returning to the past. That is why the work of local organisations is a key contribution to social recovery. It is precisely the organisations that work for peace, non-violence, democracy and human rights that are the 'saviours' of the memory of peaceful reintegration, and are still active in local communities today. They don't divide the people into Serbs and Croats.

It was in 2019 that the government of the Republic of Croatia recognised the importance of peaceful reintegration - after 20 years - declaring it a so-called national day. Peaceful reintegration has thus slightly emerged from the oblivion of Croatia's war history. As it is considered to be the UN's most successful peace mission, it is increasingly used as an example to warring factions in different parts of the world who want to stop conflict and begin peace talks. We will be hearing about Croatia's peaceful reintegration more often in the coming years because this example, along with all the pain experienced in the war, should be the social foundation for rebuilding future relations and developing local communities. When people participate in the 'commemoration walk' on the 18th of November, perhaps there can be a 'common future walk' on the 15th of January. One should not exclude the other.

6

A Unique Fire Brigade

Nikola Stamatović



Nikola Stamatović tries to forget some years of his life, to not recall them. His life is good now. He gets on well with his wife. They're both retired, healthy, they travel occasionally, take walks by the Danube, and have friends over. Their sons live faraway, but they have good jobs and are happy. Their parents are happy for them. Nikola keeps bees at their countryside house near the Danube, plants fruit trees, and does simple things that do not cause stress. All of this for him is what makes a good day. There has been too much stress for him in a single lifetime. Their life in Vukovar had begun fantastically well.

He met his wife in Belgrade when they were both students. He was from Dečani and studying law. She was from Drvar and studying on a scholarship from the Borovo factory. As soon as she graduated from university, she got a job at the factory. In 1984, they moved to Vukovar. They got a comfortable flat in the factory's modern housing complex. Nikola retrained and found a job as one of the 110 professional firemen at the factory. In that same year, the couple had their first son. They found friends quickly and easily among work colleagues and neighbours. The factory housing complex had an indoor and outdoor swimming pool, a cinema, playground, and a restaurant with a beautiful terrace with live music in the Workers' Hall. The terrace would get so packed in the evenings that one of them had to leave work an hour early to get a table. They sung the popular hits of that time, celebrated the holidays, bathed and fished in the Danube, and spent the summer holidays at the Borovo factory holiday resorts. "We were completely intermixed and we had no idea what anyone's nationality was," said Nikola.

When 1991 came, the fantastic times were over. New values became pronounced, Nikola said. The values connected to national and party affiliations trumped those of unity. One group threatened another, and then another group would threaten someone else. Soon enough, no one trusted anyone. Tension only grew. Shady characters started driving around at night in cars with no registration plates. Gunshots were heard quickly followed by the screeching of car tyres. Bombs were placed in bars, people were arrested (and some disappeared), barricades emerged in the surrounding villages, and one morning people with weapons were standing outside the Borovo factory. Nikola felt the fear growing inside him. He felt helpless. His sleep has never been the same since. He's still startled by the slightest noise. He left with his family in May 1991 for Montenegro.

When he returned at the end of 1991, what he found resembled Hiroshima. Not a single building (or even lamp post) had remained whole. Only a single lane had been cleared for traffic. There was no electricity or water. Their flat had been damaged by the shelling. He tried to patch things up, but there were always leaks. He ate at the public kitchen. He got water from the cistern and put it into his canisters. He used a wood stove to keep warm.

It was not a good place for adults or children, but the Stamatović family still had a place to live and a way to survive. Nikola gathered his firemen colleagues. They got the remaining fire engines and equipment and registered as the Fire Unit of the Vukovar Municipality. They did this because the Borovo factory didn't need the equipment, and there was a great need for firemen in the town. Many houses were on fire. They cleared the roads, removed ruined chimneys, and even rescued farm animals. Nikola was the commander. His wage would cover a mere week, but his wife was working at the factory and they managed to survive. Those years were like purgatory. Nikola was waiting for an end to the lawlessness, the smuggling, the poverty, and the lack of any hope for the future. He was waiting for life to start over again.

At first the talks of reintegration were just rumours. Nikola says that they had no information. They didn't know what would come, if people would be killed, or whether they should stay or leave. There was a lot of speculation, uncertainty and fear. Some were publicly saying that they should all leave, and the loudest voices were from those who had money and a place to go.

His fire unit joined the Transitional Police Force in 1996, and a colleague who was a returnee was telling Nikola to leave. He told him that he wasn't needed there anymore. However, his superiors, particularly the sergeant from Vinkovci, were reasonable and kind. The whole unit of 46 firemen remained in Vukovar, and signed a contract with the municipal police in 1997. Their first salaries were in Kuna. They were about twenty times higher than those in dinars, and they were paid out in cash. Some of the locals didn't want to accept the currency, but when the third salary came, they took their money and asked if they could also have the first two paid back to them. They hired some twenty young Croat firemen from Vukovar that year. Some of their fathers had been killed in the war, or they were missing. Nikola would meet them on their first morning, talk to them, then introduce them to the rest of the unit. The whole group knew that no misbehaviour would be tolerated.

If they were planning to give each other dirty looks and provoke each other, they would need to leave immediately. It's that kind of service - their lives depend on one another. One cannot enter a fire without trusting that their colleague would look out for them as if they were brothers.

Even though it had been decided in Vukovar that the head positions of public services would be filled by Croats, and their replacements would be Serbs, UNTAES had advocated for Nikola based on his hard and responsible work. On the day the peaceful reintegration process had been completed, the 15th of July 1998, Nikola signed a contract with the municipal police as the commander of the Public Fire Unit of Vukovar. "We've never had any problems, not in the transitional period, or ever," says Nikola. This wasn't the case only during working hours. Colleagues partied together, and celebrated birthdays, name days and religious holidays. They played pool together, barbecued, joked at everyone's expense and most importantly - talked about everything.

Our Differences and Pains

Lilijana Radobuljac



"Peaceful reintegration has been successful!" shouted Lijana Radobuljac entering the teachers' room of the Nikola Tesla Technical School in the Borovo housing complex. Four years had passed since the peaceful reintegration process had begun, and she had just spotted two students kissing in the corridor. They were students from different classes - from the separated schools as the media termed it. But the students from the Technical School were not separated even though their curricula were taught in Serbian and Croatian, and in Cyrillic and Latin alphabets. They attended classes in the same building and at the same times. Lijana teaches Croatian Language and Literature to both groups. The teachers are not separated either. They have one teachers' room.

Lilijana is from Vinkovci. After graduating in Croatian Language and Literature in Osijek in 1994, she was hired as a teacher in the Mate Balota Secondary School in Poreč. There was no work in her native Vinkovci. Counting on the fact that the war had to end at some point, and that the occupied areas would go back to being part of the Republic of Croatia, She believed that there would be work. Lilijana had registered with the Vukovar-Srijem Municipality as a qualified person who would like to work in her home region. Sure enough, in 1998, she was offered a job in Vukovar. She was right. The war had ended. Croatia was whole, and there was work.

She had only been to Vukovar twice before the war. The first time was when her father took her to the swimming pool, and the second was a visit to the furniture shop, Lav, where she picked out things for her room. She had made friends from Vukovar in her hometown and heard stories about what a wonderful city it was. That had been the additional motivating factor for accepting the job. However, what she found when she arrived was horrific. The city was like an open wound. When the Vukovar bus went from the darkness of the city into the little village of Nuštar, she felt as if she were in Bethlehem. But the school was the light.

There was a smell of coffee when she walked into the Economics School's teachers' room on the first day - she had worked there for the first three years until she moved to the Technical School. She was among the first teachers who had come to teach in Croatian. The headmaster had not welcomed her, and no one officially introduced her. Lilijana said: "Good afternoon!", and the man who was standing at the coffee machine responded: "Good afternoon! I am Mr. Steva. Would you like a coffee?" Her work relationships were great from the start. Lilijana

says and emphasises that she is not exaggerating at all. She has never felt that she had to watch what she was saying, or that she needed to be cautious or anxious. She had not had problems with the students' parents either. Her role at the very beginning was to teach Croatian language and literature to those classes who were on the Serbian language curriculum.

But she had to be innovative and smart in the classroom.

She remembers walking into the classroom and finding a big letter U on the blackboard. She was still new at the school. She paused and collected herself quickly as if she was about to shoot a penalty. Next to the U, she wrote the number 2. She turned to the class and asked: "Do you guys listen to U2, like me?" The students applauded her. There was also the time when she walked into the classroom and heard two students shouting "This is Serbia!" through the window. She wasn't ready for something like that, and there was no way of being ready for it. She could not show her confusion in front of the students. When they saw her, the students stood and stared in fright. Those two students, who had been shouting, went pale. Lilijana looked at all of them seriously, sat down, and took notes slowly in the school logbook. Those were the most silent minutes of her teaching career. Then she stood up. she asked those two students to stand up too, and said, "If you have the need to shout, the only thing I would approve of is if you shouted 'This is a school!'" The two students apologised endlessly after that, showing her that they had understood what a mistake they had made.

When the first spontaneous commemoration walks started through the city, one passed by the Borovo complex, next to the school. One student said, "I don't want to sit by the window. They killed my father." Lilijana told him that he didn't need to sit by the window and that she was sorry for his father and him. The person walking by with a lit candle had probably lost someone close to them too.

She also remembers when the students came to school wearing football shirts belonging to the Serbian and Croatian national teams. Lilijana had to explain that this wasn't a sports school, that the polyester football shirts didn't generate a pleasant body odour in general, and that Vukovar also had local clubs, such as Vuteks-Sloga and Vukovar 1991, so they might want to support one of those teams rather than the big ones.

Then she turned up to a Saturday extra class session wearing a buttoned-up jacket with a football shirt sticking out from the top. "Miss, is that a football shirt?" the class representative asked. "Yes, it is," Lilijana answered. "And what team is it?" asked the class representative. Lilijana said: "It's my private business whom I support." They soon found out that she was a huge fan of the Cibaliya team from Vinkovci. They started following its results and teasing her if the team was losing, but they never came to school in football shirts after that. There are many more examples of laughter and good things. When the headmaster told her in 2001 that she would be the tutor for a Serbian curriculum class, she said: "Fine." And that's how it was - fine. That whole class came to Vinkovci to her book launch. Her book, *At the Doorstep*, was, among other things, about the war years. For many of the students, it was their first time in Vinkovci. "We have found ways to understand each other, and most importantly, to understand all our differences and our pains," says Lilijana.



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The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is Germany's oldest political foundation with a rich social democratic heritage that goes back to 1925. The work of our political foundation is focused on the founding ideas and values of social democracy: freedom, justice, solidarity and the maintaining of peace. This connects us to social democracy and independent unions. The regional office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Zagreb was opened in 1996 and is in charge of projects in Croatia and Slovenia. The main components of our work are the strengthening of democratic institutions, discussion of the concepts of economic and social reform, interethnic dialogue and peace-making, the support and promotion of union activities, support for organisations that promote the development of an active and pluralistic civil society, and direct engagement in social-ecological transition.



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Europe House Vukovar

Europe House Vukovar was founded in 2000 with the aim to strengthen European ideas in the Republic of Croatia, presenting the cultural and national heritage of Croatia in Europe, informing citizens on the process of EU expansion, developing a sense of belonging to Europe, and developing a culture of understanding, tolerance, and dialogue with other European peoples and states. The mission of Europe House Vukovar is to initiate and support socio-economic development in Vukovar-Srijem County in order to solidify peace and further the wellbeing of its population. It also aims to engage regionally in egalitarian and effective collaboration with other entities in the EU member states. The area of work of Europe House Vukovar includes the implementation of its programmes for the improvement of the quality of life for all citizens, which focus specifically on minorities and marginalised social groups.



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