

Peaceful Reintegration

The Discarded Triumph of Reason and Peace

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- Why did Croatian President Franjo Tuđman prefer the uncertain and politically sensitive process of Croatia's peaceful return to the Danube region to a military operation?
- The peaceful reintegration in Croatia began on January 15, 1996 when the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1037 and established a Transitional Authority in Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES).
- The Erdut Agreement is a document that provides for the establishment of a provisional transitional UN administration, demilitarization, the return of displaced persons, the restoration of property, the right of all Croatian citizens to return to their pre-war places of residence and respect of "the highest levels of internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms."
- It remains an astonishing fact to this day that under the conditions of a juridical vacuum, fear and mutual distrust during the whole two-year process of the peaceful reintegration not a single critical incident occurred, notwithstanding provocations, unpleasant as they were, but without serious consequences.
- The contribution of peacekeeping NGOs to the peaceful reintegration is still widely unfamiliar to the general public although they started the process a year and a half before the military and political circumstances instigated the governments to also embrace peace.

“The sound of the siren indicates the end of the last war in Europe. It is over.” These were the words of the US Ambassador to Croatia Peter W. Galbraith, uttered on February 22, 1996 in Osijek. One minute before, at 6.34 p.m., in the city center for notification he personally activated the shrill siren sound that at last ended almost half a decade of the incessant condition of general threat for the whole area of Osijek.¹ And this was not merely a diplomatic performance. At that time, the capital of Slavonia was still the last accessible point of Eastern Croatia. Ever since the autumn of 1991, occupied territory had surrounded Osijek from three sides, pitch dark by night, and threatening its inhabitants with over 200 gun barrels of heavy, enemy artillery. But now, “visibly excited, in the presence of a large number of the people of Osijek”², personally putting an end to the condition of general threat, Galbraith guaranteed that all of that was now over. Peace was restored to Osijek. “The last war in Europe” came to an end, nothing more and nothing less. The peaceful reintegration was beginning. However, the people on the other side of the line of demarcation no doubt also had reason to feel relief: in the altered power relations following Operation Storm and Operation Flash, they, even more than the people of Osijek, had reason to fear war and grenades.

Only, who was to take this declamatory story of yet another foreign diplomat seriously? Neither the people of Osijek, nor the people on the other side of the imposed “border” were inclined to believe that the war was really over. For four and a half years people on both sides had lived their lives on the front of a 173 km² long battlefield. In the autumn of 1991 a third of Croatian territory, Slavonia included, was struck by violence in the name of a Greater Serbia, which appalled the whole world, causing, along with everything else, revenge on Serbs from Croatia who did not join the mutiny. According to data from the Croatian government 76.669 non-Serbs⁴ were expelled from Slavonia and had been living in banishment for five years. The fate of the 2.792 persons⁵ that

went missing in 1991 was still unknown. Horrid war crimes were committed against Croats in Vukovar, Lovas, Berak, Čelije, Dalj, Tovarnik... According to the data that Ivan Vrkić provides, more than 2.500 Croats were killed and 8.770⁶ wounded in Eastern Slavonia. After a four-year long frozen war the suicidal stubbornness of the political leadership of the self-proclaimed Republic Serbian Krajina led to Operation Storm and Operation Flash. In these two military operations, one in May and one in August 1995, the Croatian army triumphantly and with lightning speed destroyed the opposing Krajina army. But as the enemy army left Croatia, so did a vast majority of Croatia’s Serbian citizens who had lived here for centuries. The precise numbers have never been determined, but it is estimated that in the great flight after Operation Storm around 200.000 people left Croatia. The rare few who had stayed were subjected to violence and revenge, for in the months following Operation Storm dozens of people, mostly the lonely and elderly, were murdered and thousands of houses were burnt. The violence continued well into the period when the peaceful reintegration had already begun. There is no research concerning this issue, but we will probably not err in saying that the relations between Serbs and Croats in the fall of 1995 were the worst since WWII. Given these conditions, commonsense reasoning in Croatia saw only one probable outcome: a new military operation in Eastern Slavonia, if necessary regardless of the losses, as a sign of revenge for the almost four year long occupation and for all the undeserved and needless harm. The Croatian government and the military cabinet had minutely planned the armed liberation of Eastern Slavonia and prepared for it thoroughly in the field. Different authors list multiple, possible names of this operation like Chariots of Fire, the Vukovar Dove, the Long jump (to Dalj), the Danube⁷... Meanwhile confusion and fear ruled Croatia’s occupied East caused by the political manipulation of the defeated and criminal government. A declaration published on August 30, 1995 in the “Vukovar Newspaper” by Slavko Dokmanović, the mayor of the occupied area and

1. Vrkić, p. 41.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid, p. 5.

4. *Olujni mir*, p. 47

5. Ibid, p. 51.

6. Vrkić, p. 11.

7. Holjevac Tuković, p. 65; Morić, p. 15; Vrkić, p. 10..

an accused suspect by the Hague tribunal, testify best to this: "...Vukovar is the place where the Ustaše got their independence and it will be the place where they'll lose it. Here we will break their neck. That is our inevitable God given destiny. They tore apart our hearths, chased us off to a wasteland. Now they'll get war. That is not what we wanted, neither did Serbia. There is no other way out. We will repay every strike that hit us manifold and stronger. Our fist will smite them..."⁸ For the first time since 1991, however, influential politicians fortunately decided to give peace a chance.

The negotiations for a peaceful solution in Eastern Slavonia had already begun in the first weeks after Operation Storm and soon became a marginal part of US president Bill Clinton's initiative on a complete peace solution for Bosnia and Herzegovina that would be finalized by signing the Dayton Agreement in Dayton and Paris⁹. A first draft of the peace agreement for Eastern Slavonia was propositioned to the Croatian government on September 25, 1995 by ambassador Galbraith¹⁰. In the next month and a half up to November 12 a series of diplomatic negotiations were to precede the signing of the the basic document of the peaceful reintegration titled "The Basic Agreement on the Region of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium." The meeting on November 1 in Dayton was certainly the most important of the negotiation series. That is when the Croatian and Serbian presidents, Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević, both basically consented to a peaceful solution.¹¹

The Basic Agreement on the Region of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium was signed on November 12, 1995. On behalf of the Serbian party it was signed by negotiator Milan Milanović in Erdut, a village on the Danube east of Osijek, hence the agreement colloquially came to be known as the "Erdut Agreement". That same day on behalf of Croatia the agreement was signed in Zagreb by Hrvoje Šarinić, chief of the president's personal office. The signing of the agreement was witnessed and co-signed in Zagreb and in Erdut by

the US ambassador to Croatia Peter W. Galbraith and the UN mediator Thorvald Stoltenberg.¹² It is a short, but crucial document of 14 articles that provides for the establishment of a provisional transitional UN administration, demilitarization, the return of displaced persons, the restoration of property, the right of all Croatian citizens to return to their pre-war places of residence and respect of "the highest levels of internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms"¹³.

But why did Croatian President Franjo Tuđman, who was the main decision maker¹⁴, prefer the uncertain and politically sensitive process of Croatia's peaceful return to the Danube region to a spectacular military operation, in which Croatia would most certainly have triumphed, and that would, no doubt, be welcomed by a large part of the Croatian public? That question remains without a precise and definite answer to this day. Did Tuđman, as is commonly assumed, simply give in to international pressure? There is namely no question about it that the international community wanted the conflict resolved peacefully. It is known that the military liberation of Croatia's occupied territory aroused discontent and caution among the world's diplomats, who reacted by postponing Croatia's membership in the European Council. Croatian sources, however, do not accept the conclusion that international demands exerted such crucial influence on Tuđman's decision. In the, so far, most thorough historiographical study of the peaceful reintegration Ana Holjevac Tuković, for example, suggests that it was the Croatian government that autonomously "decided to negotiate with the mutinous Serbs" and portends that "the months-long negotiations between the Croatian authorities and the leadership of the rebellious Serbs that were aimed at solving the problem of the remaining occupied territory peacefully" had begun even before the US peace initiative.¹⁵ Did president Tuđman therefore opt for the peaceful solution utterly out of humane reasons, simply wishing to save human lives, as his then associate Vesna Škare-Ožbolt claims? In

8. Holjevac Tuković, p. 62/63.

9. Ibid, pp. 65

10. Ibid, p. 66.

11. Ibid, p. 71.

12. *Olujni mir*, p. 27.

13. Ibid, p. 28.

14. *Olujni mir*, p. 153.

15. Holjevac Tuković, p. 65.

2013 she namely stated that Tuđman, having heard the estimated number of potential casualties from a military operation – 1.500, which was almost a tenth of the total number of people killed in the whole war in Croatia – “decided to avoid military action by all means”.¹⁶ “He justified his decision with the following words: ‘Every life is important to me, Croatian and Serbian’”.¹⁷ However, keeping in mind the unpunished violence against Serbs who had stayed in the territory freed in Operation Storm, this explanation from Tuđman’s close associate cannot be accepted easily. Whatever the reasons that outweighed the use of violence, it is the author’s opinion that the decision to peacefully reintegrate the Croatian Danube region was one of Tuđman’s wisest and most far-reaching statesman’s decisions, and the author agrees with the judgment of human rights activist Gordan Bosanac that “from a humanistic position the peaceful reintegration is more successful than the military Operation Storm”.¹⁸ As it concerns Slobodan Milošević and the political leadership of the rebellious Serbs in Croatia, their consent to a peaceful restitution of the occupied territory of Eastern Slavonia to Croatia is the only wise decision of their entire political careers, that at the same time shows they could have done everything differently from the beginning – had they only wanted to.

The peaceful reintegration began on January 15, 1996 when the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1037 and established a Transitional Authority in Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES). Two days later, the UN Secretary-General appointed a leader for this peace mission: the 57-year-old US General and diplomat Jaques Paul Klein. “Besides much effort invested, Croatia was lucky regarding the choice of the Transitional Administrator”, reckoned Croatian official representatives when all was finished.¹⁹ “It was that man, who, knowing his goal and doing things his own way, did the job in a year’s time, where many other UN mission

chiefs in Croatia failed.”²⁰ Jaques Paul Klein indeed epitomized all the attributes needed for the untypical and seemingly hopeless job: to impose peace in a war torn country. He had the skills and eloquence of a diplomat, the determination of a statesman, the acuteness and adamancy of a soldier, even the roughness of a criminal when necessary, and all of that wrapped in the likable and cheerful personality of a man who never hid spontaneous, unaffected sympathy and humanity. In Croatia, among Croats and among Serbs, Jacques Paul Klein will be remembered as a benevolent, reasonable and efficient politician whose successes should set an example for the local political class.

“We wanted to introduce our administration as soon as possible, the Serbs wished that would never happen, while UNTAES was ready to reinstate our administration, but with all Serbs remaining in that territory. At this moment it all seems incompatible. One excludes the other.”²¹ This is how Ivica Vrkić described the odds for the peaceful reintegration in December 1995. The politician of the Croatian People’s Party from Osijek was chosen by Franjo Tuđman and appointed head of the transitional administration office for the restoration of Croatian authorities in the territory of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium by the Croatian government on December 29, 1995. By appointing Tuđman’s associate and then member of the presidential council of the Croatian president, Vesna Škare-Ožbolt²² to be the coordinator of the activities of the transitional administration office, the Croatian side set up the conditions for the concrete implementation of the peaceful reintegration. The Serbian party appointed the signer of the Erdut Agreement, Milan Milanović, as the main negotiator. Until then he was the assistant minister of defense in the so-called Republic Serbian Krajina. The Croatian party did not miss his statement the day after the Erdut Agreement was signed. These were his words: “The crucial

16. Gaća, p. 19.

17. Ibid.

18. Bosanac, p. 10.

19. *Olujni mir*, p. 270.

20. Ibid.

21. Vrkić, p. 25.

22. https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vesna_%C5%A0kare-O%C5%BEbolt

point here is that the Security Council and the UN administration remain in this territory together with the international forces. That means no Croatian police, no Croatian customs, no Croatian institutions of any kind.”²³

Today, twenty years later, it is difficult to envisage the atmosphere of mutual distrust between Croats and Serbs that marked the beginning of the whole process. Joško Morić, then assistant minister of the interior and appointed to run the process of transition of the interim UNTAES police force on behalf of the Croatian government, described the context of that delicate political moment: “Most politicians in the Croatian government of that time only spoke publicly about the peaceful reintegration when they had to. Their optimism was political, not personal. Political analysts declared orally and in writing that the international community needs the attempt of peaceful reintegration as proof that the peoples of Western Balkans are divided by too great differences. Hence a constant presence of a foreign guardian is required, which justifies long-term foreign influence in this region. The former Yugoslav government and the local Serbs in Croatia needed the attempt of a failed reintegration as proof that Croats do not want coexistence with Serbs. The Croatian authorities needed a failed reintegration as a convincing excuse for a military solution to the problem.”²⁴ The problems appeared even deeper on a personal level. Even the tolerant liberal nationalist Ivica Vrkić described his sentiments at the beginning of the process with the following words: “I was curiously awaiting the first encounter with the Serbs. I imagined the first Serb from the occupied territory I would meet after the war would be standing behind a big cannon with a bottle of brandy in his hand and firing away on my town, Osijek. I do not know why, but that was my first connotation. I am aware it does not have to be like that, but at the moment I am not really keen on differentiating between them at all.”²⁵

In spite of all that the peaceful reintegration started off surprisingly well: in March 1996, two

months after the process had begun and for the first time after the war displaced persons visited their houses in the villages Bilje, Darda, Mece and Čeminac in the Baranja region. Five months after the ratification of the Erdut Agreement, and three months after the concrete beginning of the peaceful reintegration, three of the designated five thousand UNTAES “Blue Helmets” were allocated to the Danube region. Their most important mission, demilitarization, was completed as soon as June 21: “on a diplomatic initiative without a single shot fired”²⁶ the Serbian army in the Danube region, a four brigade corps, was dismissed and 118 tanks, 19 armored vehicles, 150 mortars and a lot of other weaponry was taken to Serbia.²⁷ The hardest piece of work was done smoothly, moreover “voluntarily”²⁸, but what was yet impending was the extremely sensitive and dangerous process of introducing a mixed Croatian-Serbian police force, that was to guarantee safety to all the people who had in the past five years looked at each other in hatred. “The idea of restoring trust in practice often resulted in distrust. Whatever we began, from at least two sides there came a dozen reasons why that was not possible.” as Joško Morić sums it up.²⁹ And yet “the common sense strategy was gaining support.”³⁰ With the “common sense strategy” Morić refers to the actions of the experimental police in an atmosphere of a juridical vacuum, neither war nor peace, an atmosphere laden with fear, mutual distrust and war traumas, in which the guardians of order needed to preclude incidents and at the same time had to guarantee everyone their rights according to the Erdut Agreement. “The common sense logic dictated that the process of a spontaneous return of Croats needed to be controlled and that it ought to be insisted that the spontaneous return became organized in time. Without control and organization, incidents would accumulate and a great number of incidents would stop the whole process. In the case of displaced Serbs from other areas of Croatia, who had moved into Croats’ houses and now wished

23. Milanović as cited in Holjevac Tuković, p. 75.

24. Morić, p. 15.

25. Vrkić, p. 30.

26. *Olujni mir*, p. 336.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 336.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 336.

29. Morić, p. 15.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

to leave, common sense required, facilitating their departure without rushing them, but also to prevent them from taking away the house owner's property. It was reasonable to ensure a quiet and undisturbed life to Serbs living in their own houses, on their own property. Reason warned us that these issues should be spoken about publicly noting clearly that the police would prevent interethnic conflicts."³¹

Under such conditions it remains an astonishing fact to this day that during the whole two-year process of the peaceful reintegration not a single critical incident occurred, notwithstanding provocations, unpleasant as they were, but without serious consequences.³² Indeed, one member of the UNTAES, the Belgian petty officer Olivier Gossye was murdered³³, but the murder was described as a "criminal and not political act."³⁴ An explanation of such an unexpected, but certainly lucky course of events might lie in the assumption that, maybe, only the political leaders wished for incidents, but not the average citizens. To confirm this thesis, two important, though often neglected phenomena, could be provided: the first is that peaceful reintegration had begun, shyly yet concretely, even before the official onset on January 15, 1996 and the second is the phenomenon of the so-called "Klein's marketplace" which within only a few months reunited dozens of the thousands of people, who had been forcibly separated by war.

In the summer of 1994 in the Hungarian town of Mohács, non-governmental organizations for human rights organized the first encounters of separated citizens.³⁵ The meetings in the "House of Encounters" were initiated and organized by NGOs from Croatia and Serbia, connecting first peace activists and then citizens.³⁶ As soon as he assumed the office, Transitional Administrator Klein supported the work of those NGOs and instantly let them work in the UNTAES territory,

so nearly a hundred peace activists entered the Danube region daily, strengthening the safety, precluding incidents and helping all citizens.³⁷ The contribution of peacekeeping NGOs to the peaceful reintegration is still widely unfamiliar to the general public although they started the process a year and a half before the military and political circumstances instigated the governments to also embrace peace. "The efforts of the civil society are less familiar and less recognized, even though they were a significant component of the peace process before, during and after the UNTAES mandate of the peaceful reintegration", wrote Katarina Kruhonja, head of the Centre for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights from Osijek, a peace organization that was crucial for the activist contribution to the whole process.³⁸

General Klein, however, also wisely sensed the potential of "common sense" that the head of the transitional police force Joško Morić was referring to. On June 23, 1996, only a day after the demilitarization of Eastern Slavonia had been completed, a commercial meeting point³⁹ was established near Osijek on Klein's initiative. That place of encounters will go down in history under its colloquial name "Klein's marketplace". Even representatives of the Croatian authorities admit that this seemingly banal project "drew the most attention of Croatian citizens on the free and on UNTAES territory." In only three months, until September 1996, that marketplace hosted the encounters of "over 60.000 people from both sides of the former line of demarcation" without a single incident, which among other things "contributed to trust building"⁴⁰. These two examples – the peacebuilding work of activists independent of the state and the free encounters of people at the marketplace with no incidents – strongly support the claim that the "regular people" on both sides of the line of demarcation sincerely wanted peace and an end to the war. One could even take it a step further alleging that it was precisely the

31. Morić, p. 15.

32. *Olujni mir*, p. 16–17, p. 314; *Identitet*, June 1997.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

35. Vego, p. 66.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Olujni mir*, p. 106.

40. *Olujni mir*, p. 130.

extremist politicians, who in spite of the wishes of citizens whom they were supposed to represent, actively attempted to disable the normalization of relations, reconciliation and a successful reintegration. Solid proof of this exists. One such piece of evidence was disclosed by Jaques Paul Klein in an interview for the Croatian daily paper *Jutarnji list* from 2013. The question “who caused him the most trouble” with respect to the marketplace, Klein answered⁴¹: “When I opened the road near Nemetin so that separated families from the occupied territory could meet their dear ones in the free part of Croatia, there were obstructions. One local leader attempted to forbid that from happening, claiming there was an outbreak of the foot-and-mouth disease in UNTAES territory. Thereupon I called Bruxelles asking whether they knew there were cattle diseases in Croatia. They were surprised and announced they would shut down the import of meat immediately. When I informed Tuđman about that, he got furious and reprimanded the local politician in question. Within 24 hours everything was settled.” Asked whether he was referring to the former prefect of the Osijek-Baranja county Branimir Glavaš, Klein answered in the affirmative.⁴²

The situation was even more difficult on the Serbian side. The Serbian war mayor of Vukovar Slavko Dokmanović, an accused suspect of the Hague Tribunal for war crimes in Vukovar, who adamantly refused any conversation about normalization processes, was not deposed until April 1996. A year later, on June 27, 1997⁴³ he was arrested by the UNTAES in Vukovar and extradited to the Hague Tribunal, whereupon he committed suicide in confinement on June 29, 1998⁴⁴. Although Dokmanović never once succeeded in interfering with the reintegration, because the Serbian negotiating team was headed by the significantly more moderate Milan Milanović, in April 1996 the Croatian side was

surprised by the news that Slobodan Milošević had divested Milanović of his office and appointed Goran Hadžić to his position, a war leader of the Serbs in Eastern Slavonia whom the Croats detested.⁴⁵ To the position of president of the “executive council of the region” – that is how the government of the remaining occupied territory of Croatia was then called – Milošević appointed the Vukovar physician Vojislav Stanimirović. He, too, was rumored to have played a disgraceful role in the war, but those allegations were never proven, not even after several investigations by the Croatian State Attorney’s office. Unlike Hadžić, in the following months Stanimirović proved a reliable negotiator and cooperative counterpart. Even though Stanimirović was and has remained one of the favorite targets of the Croatian right-wing extremists, Ivica Vrkić, without whom the peaceful reintegration certainly would not have been successful, describes the politician for the Serbs in Croatia as an associate who was “always ready for cooperation.”⁴⁶ Goran Hadžić strived to uphold his unintelligible “policy”, that basically came down to attempts of self-preservation, until the elections in April 1997, when he was politically buried for good by his attempt to obstruct the results of the elections.⁴⁷ Subsequently he went to Serbia and into hiding from an indictment by the Hague. He was arrested on July 20, 2011. The trial began the next year and Hadžić, ill, forgotten and abject, died on July 12, 2016.⁴⁸ Be that as it may, there is a considerable amount of evidence that the average citizens on both sides wanted a peaceful solution⁴⁹, but it appears to be a reasonable conclusion that the peaceful reintegration could only succeed because the former Croatian and Serbian leaders Franjo Tuđman and Slobodan Milošević appointed cooperative politicians willing to compromise as key negotiators - Ivica Vrkić and Vesna Škare-Ožbolt on the Croatian side, and Vojislav Stanimirović on the Serbian side. Had

41. Interview of Drago Hedl with Jacques Paul Klein, *Jutarnji list*, December 6, 2013., <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/jacques-paul-klein-za-jutarnji-kad-je-glavas-na-stol-stavio-pistolj-od-9-mm-ja-sam-izvukao-magnum/926006/>

42. Ibid.

43. http://www.icty.org/x/cases/dokmanovic/cis/bcs/cis_dokmanovic_BCS.pdf

44. Ibid.

45. *Olujni mir*, p. 60.

46. *Istočno od Zapada*, p. 403.

47. *Olujni mir*, p. 219.

48. http://www.icty.org/x/cases/hadzic/cis/bcs/cis_hadzic_bcs.pdf

49. In June and July 1996 the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar from Zagreb conducted an empirical research about the attitudes of displaced Croats about the peaceful reintegration which showed “that a little more than a half (50.1%) of the respondents agreed with the plan of the peaceful reintegration” (Živić, p. 4).

they done the contrary, which they could have and at one phase even tried, the whole process would have come to an inglorious end. The question as to why they did not act that same way in all other situations is an important one that should not be evaded, but is not subject to this treatise.

The complete success of the demilitarization of the Danube region had an encouraging effect on everybody. Furthermore, the citizens' obvious readiness for encounters that was clearly shown at "Klein's marketplace" opened the space for the most sensitive part of the process: the beginning of the return of displaced Croats into their houses and of Serbs into their pre-war houses elsewhere in Croatia. The General Amnesty Act that was passed on May 17, 1996 partly appeased the Serbs' apprehensions of persecution for war crimes, although the issue of war crimes remains a painful unresolved problem for the whole of Croatian society to this day. In November 1996 the first displaced persons started returning into the villages of the so-called Sirmium triangle, the southernmost area of the Danube region that was among the first to be released to Croatian governance by the UNTAES.⁵⁰ On All Saints' Day, for the first time after the war, it was organized for 1.910 displaced persons to visit their family graves and soon the same was organized for 1.030 Serbs, who after Operation Storm had found temporary shelter in the Danube region.⁵¹ Encouraged by these successes the UNTAES soon launched a program of the so-called "sponsored visits"⁵² within which around 3.000 people visited the Danube region.⁵³ Slowly but surely the space was opening for their return.

Between the Croatian authorities and the international transitional administration there was no doubt about it, the peaceful reintegration was an undertaking of the entire Croatian society and the state. Many different processes took place simultaneously. After all, the entire social context of the recently occupied territory was to

be involved in a kind of "institutional revolution" and adapted to a completely opposite, up until yesterday, hostile social system and all of that in a short period. The high point of all these processes were the local elections on April 13, 1997, for in a political, institutional and symbolic sense they meant the abolition of the "Krajina" authorities, but also of the "transitional" UN authorities and the introduction of the legal authorities of the Croatian constitutional system in the whole Danube region. The implementation of that process also proceeded exemplarily with only a few difficulties like e.g. the Serbs' hesitation to vote⁵⁴ or the problems of constituting the Vukovar town council.⁵⁵ An analysis of these interesting events could also reveal a competition of advocates and opponents of the peaceful reintegration within the authorities of both sides, but this issue cannot be dealt with here due to space limitations. In any case, it can be concluded that the local elections and the constitution of the authorities in the Danube region were carried out without a single serious incident, like all the other crucial events of the peaceful reintegration, and all of that under conditions where the most banal symbolic act could have disrupted the whole process.⁵⁶

The reintegration was heading toward its – for the Croats – triumphal ending on June 15 when Croatian President Franjo Tuđman and his associates came to Vukovar on the so-called "peace train" where he held a speech in front of the ghastly wrecked train station offering the Serbs a peaceful life in Croatia under the condition they accepted the country as their homeland. At the same time, the arrival of the "peace train" in Vukovar along with the last months of the peaceful reintegration marked the beginning of the "cooling" of Tuđman's authorities' dedication to the politics of compromise and moderation. Ivica Vrkić was moved to another position, assuming that office with a sense of abandonment "like the conductor on the peace train"⁵⁷. In early October 1997 Tuđman's authorities were forced to depose

50. *Olujni mir*, p. 402.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Olujni mir*, p. 129.

53. *Olujni mir*, p. 143.

54. *Olujni mir*, p. 204, *Istočno od Zapada*, p. 324.

55. *Istočno od Zapada*, pp. 379

56. These problems are vividly illustrated by Vrkić's description of the difficulties right before the constitutive session of the town council of Beli Manastir. *Istočno od Zapada*, p. 384.

57. *Istočno od Zapada*, p. 396.

Branimir Glavaš from the office of prefect of the Osijek-Baranja county and to constitute the National Committee for the Programme of the Realization of Trust Restoration, Rapid Return and Life Normalization to the Former War Area^{58,59}. The Croatian authorities hoped that the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan would attend the closing ceremony of the process on January 15, 1998 in Vukovar in order to acknowledge on behalf of the United Nations and personally a claim that has often been stated, but never officially confirmed, namely that the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium was the most successful peace operation in the history of the United Nations. Yet, due to the doubts that the last months cast on the process of the peaceful reintegration, that was until then almost impeccable, those hopes were dashed.

In spite of the accomplished success and although the peaceful reintegration saved thousands of human lives twenty years later an influential fraction of war veterans in Croatia regrets that the Danube region was not freed by means of a military operation. "I am exuberantly happy over our soldiers in Vukovar, but I would be happier if our army had been sent here at the time of Operation Storm", declared Tomislav Josić, head of the Council for Veterans of the Town of Vukovar and assistant to the Minister of Defenders Tomislav Medved⁶⁰ on November 14, 2017, commenting thus on the transfer of one military unit to the Vukovar garrison for the first time after the Homeland War. However, it is not only one part of the soldiers who are discontented with the peaceful solution, but also a part of Croatian academia in the humanities refer to the events as the "establishment of an unjust peace"⁶¹, although they admit that human lives were saved and that the Croatian government demonstrated "wisdom, maturity and determination."⁶²

On the other hand, human rights-activists and especially the participants of the process emphasize the value of the peaceful solution as such, but they also warn that the process was "abruptly interrupted"⁶³ while the fact that "the people who are part of the reintegration process were not dealt with systematically lead to negative consequences that are still palpable today."⁶⁴ Moreover, NGOs with experience in peacemaking policies like the Centre for Peace Studies from Zagreb called upon the Croatian authorities to recognize the peacemaking experiences from the Croatian Danube region "as Croatia's specific advantage that can be articulated in foreign policy."⁶⁵ Such dramatic disaccord with the interpretation of the peace operation that saved so many human lives cannot be explained by attitudes toward the peace operation as such; it is more an expression of a broader and more substantial disagreement about what represents the fundamental and general values of the Croatian state. This discrepancy has not been resolved since Tuđman's time, and at the time of the writing of this text it is most dramatically reflected in a social controversy that has lasted for months about whether the Ustaše salute "Za dom spremni" should become publicly tolerable or not. To this effect, the advocacy or the opposition to the peaceful reintegration basically comes down to one question: Was it right to let the Serbs stay in the Danube region or did they, in the greatest possible number, like most of their fellow countrymen after Operation Storm, deserve to be sent to Serbia forever?

Although fully aware of the severity of war trauma in Croatia and especially in Vukovar, the author of this text considers this dilemma to be an inhumane, undemocratic and belligerent political hoax fabricated by the Croatian extreme right. In this treatise we unmistakably argue for the merit of the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region first and above all because it saved human lives and secondly, and hardly less important, because by means of this process

58. *Olujni mir*, pp. 23

59. Translator's note: [http://digured.srce.hr/webpac-hidra-](http://digured.srce.hr/webpac-hidra-imnt/?rm=results&show_full=1&f=IDbib&v=IT039816&filter=hidra-imnt)

imnt/?rm=results&show_full=1&f=IDbib&v=IT039816&filter=hidra-imnt

60. <http://www.dnevno.hr/domovina/josic-o-hrvatskoj-vojsci-u-vukovaru-bio-bih-sretniji-da-su-dosli-za-vrijeme-oluje-1091761/>

61. Živić, p. 5.

62. Živić, p. 4.

63. Gaća, p. 19.

64. Ibid.

65. Bosanac, p. 12.

Croatia achieved a goal it had strived for when demanding secession from Yugoslavia in 1991: a multinational democratic society capable of and directed toward tolerance. This is why this text will end quoting one of the main individuals involved in implementing the peaceful reintegration, the war veteran and police officer Joško Morić, who in his paper “The (Un)Wanted Reintegration” wrote the following: “The peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region or the UNTAES mission solved the problem and finished by putting an end to the conflict. (...) Operations Flash and Storm are victories that brought liberty through arms and we have the right and reasons to commemorate and celebrate them. Unlike those, peaceful reintegration is a victory of reason. In all the countries with developed democracies, in all international organizations including those of a political and military nature like NATO, which we are a member of or like the EU, which we are also a member of, there is the tendency to resolve conflicts by the triumph of reason, not arms. It is incredible, not natural nor logical that all our governments so far have considered a victory of reason inferior to a victory through arms.”⁶⁶ And that is why, today, twenty years later, we must return to Peter Galbraith’s joyous conclusion from Osijek in 1996, the one from the beginning of this text about the war being “over” and then look back anxiously and sadly asking: Is it really over?

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66. Morić, p. 16.

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