



EWI Fellowship Research Programme

THE POSSIBILITY OF PEACE – THE MORAL OF VUKOVAR

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Abstract

Peace was restored in Eastern Slavonia through the Erdut Agreement for Peaceful Reintegration and the Restoration of Trust. This Agreement, which is frequently referred to as the Project for Peaceful Integration, finally defined the territorial map of Croatia for the Croatian Danube region (i.e. Podunavlje) in the autumn of 1995 – January 1996). However on the 20th anniversary of the Agreement's realization, it has been concluded that the process of reconciliation has suffered setbacks and has come to a standstill.

This project is, therefore, the result of reflection on the paradoxical question: How is it possible to achieve peace without ever having achieved reconciliation?

With this in mind, research has been conducted which focused on the following: The impact of religious and women's civic groups, i.e. of female peace activists and women politicians for the peace processes in Slavonia (Vukovar); the Peaceful Reintegration Agreement; the current situation; the moral of the story and future perspectives, i.e. the potential for civic reconciliation.

On one hand, the research demonstrated an immense level of engagement by the aforementioned organisations for the reconciliation of the local population (Serbs and Croats) - but paradoxically, such efforts have been scarcely mentioned by the media and remain absent from governmental or political party agendas. The research also confirmed shortcomings in both local and national political infrastructure with respect to the establishment of an institutional system through which reconciliation would be made possible. Therefore, the social disposition of life in Vukovar has, to a significant extent, been reduced to an irrational discourse, a matrix which the young wish nothing other than to escape from.

Key words: peaceful reintegration, local community, women's associations, religious associations, the state, the media.

Introduction

A couple of years ago, the European House of Vukovar (in Croatian, *Europski dom Vukovar*) organised an anniversary celebration of the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region. The initiative proposed that January 15th would be officially declared a national holiday, in order to add some symbolic weight and meaning to the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

This research attempts to answer the question of why the aforementioned initiative has failed to become a part of any political agenda or to obtain substantial media attention, with the intent to become a part of public opinion, public speech and *common sense* in our territories. As a consequence, this lack of coverage has strengthened “warfare mentalities” i.e. tendencies of disintegration and stereotypes of others as “the enemy.” A warfare culture and withdrawal into oneself have resulted in a growing trend towards intolerance and an increased sense of threat and vulnerability.

The fact that both female and male peacemakers seem to have been totally forgotten is a sure sign that the war machinery remains active even after the settlement of armed conflict. This activity is found in camouflaging the causes of enormous losses as well as, in covering up the actual damage and consequences while glorifying the warrior mentality, nurturing a warrior spirit, a spirit of victory, of war heroism and of other fabricated myths.

Today, we have at our disposal an abundance of knowledge and relevant experiences in order to achieve the greatly needed social transition – one towards a culture of peace and nonviolence. In this sense, the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region represents a valuable lesson, both for Europe and the world at large, which should by all means be politically acknowledged and shared accordingly.

Problem statement and research objectives

In 1995-96, the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region finally put an end to armed conflict in Eastern Slavonia, thus saving numerous lives and stopping further destruction of property. As such, it represents the most successful UN peace plan in the last two to three decades. However, in the years to come, after its initial successes, stagnation became evident in the process of social reintegration which has continued until today. Nothing more than a

minimal initial level of trust was accomplished through peaceful reintegration and this was after almost two years of hard and intensive work by persons involved in the National Board for Reconciliation and Normalisation of Life and the UN Transitional Administration in Eastern Slavonia (UNTAES).¹

Following the successful administrative implementation of the Agreement, a standstill is recorded in the process of reconciliation and the development of Eastern Slavonia, especially after the year 2000. Based on public discussion, conferences and texts on the process, the following conclusions may be drawn:

- Huge significance of the Erdut Agreement for the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region into Croatian territory.
- Historic international relevance of the Croatian Danube peace process (as one of the most successful UN peace processes)
- General significance of the political peace model applied which put an end to armed conflict between two ethnic communities.
- Reasons for the aforementioned standstill have been identified, as well as its consequences on the population, especially two of its most affected categories: the Serb national minority and the youth of all nationalities.

The standstill has especially been manifested in the following areas:

- Standstill in the process of reintegration
- No visible signs of development (neither economically nor politically)
- Pre-existing division remains and is constantly being regenerated
- The state has not completed its task of finding missing persons or convicting war criminals
- Lack of psychosocial support for the population of Vukovar and other communities; i.e. the issue of war trauma is not being addressed at all;

¹ The Erdut Agreement – link: <https://www.zvo.hr/dokumenti/c731c4afbd208ca.pdf>

The primary success - the restoration of peace, was accomplished through the joint actions of the international community, national politics and the activities of the local community. Several years later, this was to be followed by an evident standstill in the reconciliation process, accompanied by a rise of nationalism and an eventual increase in the emigration of young people from Vukovar and Slavonia in general. The reconciliation process seems to have been abandoned by both local and national authorities as well, as demonstrated by a lack of strategy and public policies regarding the issue as well as a weak reaction to nationalist incidents. Thus, the issue of reconciliation is left to being addressed merely by groups of enthusiasts and civil society organisations, without any actual support or valorisation of their work by the government.

Theoretical framework – defining research questions and hypotheses

Following the process of reconciliation in war-affected areas, we find Vukovar to be an illustrative example of the process for Croatia as a whole. Unfortunately, after the administrative reintegration of the territory back into Croatia, the reconciliation process has reached a halt and has been stagnating ever since. Consequently, we find present-day Vukovar in an economic, political and social blockade of sorts. Why is this so? What are the possibilities for reinitiating the aforementioned reintegration processes and what type of potential exists for female and religious peace activist groups and initiatives to succeed in this respect?

Therefore, empirical research has been conducted, including a comparison with prior studies on the topic, aimed at confirming the following assumptions (i.e. hypotheses):

- State politics has failed to address the issue of reintegration of the population (settling merely for the reintegration of territory);
- The problem cannot be solved locally; mediation of the international community is necessary
- A static image has been created of a society split on the basis of nationality, showing no potential for reconciliation
- There is an inevitable polarization of the state-society (i.e. a strong state versus a weak society)

- The media has contributed to the preservation of division, rather than making efforts towards reconciliation.

Given the initial hypotheses, further questions must be raised, primarily those which represent the focal point of the research:

- How is it possible for the *peace plan to have succeeded, and the reconciliation plan not?*
- To what extent has the contribution of women (from civil society organisations, the government or religious institutions) played a significant role in the restoration of peace?
- Have women continued to play an important role in the subsequent period, during the actual implementation of the peace plan?
- Why did the process come to a standstill and what lessons can be learned by analysing the situation?
- What types of efforts have been made and how visible are they?, and finally:
- What is the potential for a strong and strategy-based renewal of activities aimed at reconciliation?

In order to answer these questions and to confirm (or refute) the given hypotheses, we set about to prepare a research plan – in other words, what to research, and how.

With the aim of obtaining a more objective view of the matter, we compared our findings with the studies/research papers listed below, which refer either directly (3) or indirectly (1) to the subject matter.

These were analysed, and a comparison was made with the results of the following research studies:

1. Building dialogue² study

² Book entitled IZGRADNJA DIJALOGA (*BUILDING DIALOGUE*), publ. UNDP, Zagreb, 2016, author Goran Božičević, reviewers Boris Pavelić, journalist and Senada Šelo Šabić, Ph.D.

Description: The study gives a review/analysis of the post-war situation in Croatia as well as of the basic principles and most important civic (and governmentally-based) organisations involved in the peace process. Examples from 30 reconciliation projects implemented throughout Croatia are given, with hundreds and thousands of participants (in cases of projects in schools) and a dozen of CSOs which conducted them, including foreign organisations providing financial or volunteer support during their implementation. The study provides an insight into the phenomenology of the reconciliation process, analyses the relationship between reconciliation and freedom, and gives a critical review of the situation, i.e., the evident standstill in the process. We are introduced to leading CSOs and activists (both male and female) involved in reconciliation projects from 1993 onwards. The study classifies the reconciliation activities conducted into four main categories and describes each individual project (pages 33-87). Finally, in the conclusion it provides important insights – guidelines for future action, which we have also compared to our own findings (see conclusions and recommended actions in the final part of the paper).

2. Media and war – the ethical challenge³

The authors conducted an analysis of texts in three daily newspapers published in Croatia in the course of 1991, namely *Vjesnik*, *Večernji list* and *Glas Slavonije*, focusing on texts describing the situation in Vukovar. A total of 354 newspaper articles were analysed. The aim of the research was to establish whether newspapers promoted war and violence, if they were guided by facts or served as a means of war propaganda and to what extent they spurred hatred against the enemy. Analysis of the texts showed no false information being reported by the newspapers, but rather indicated their attempts to remain objective; furthermore, it found them to not have been used as a means of propaganda, but on the other hand, to have indeed been quite emotionally coloured. Despite the newspapers' evident attempts to be objective and informative, the authors concluded that journalists had used only one side as a source, namely their own, in reporting the conflict. In no more than 18 articles were derogatory terms found for “the other side.” No nationalist ideas were reported, but rather patriotic statements and expressions.

³ “Mediji i rat-etički izazov. Tiskovni mediji u Domovinskom ratu na primjeru Vukovara 1991.“ (*The media and war. Print media in the Croatian Homeland War on the example of Vukovar in 1991*) (a study by Marija Barčot and Danijel Labaš as authors)

The given analysis is quite significant in answering the question of how the “image of the enemy,” which was quite strong at the time of implementation of the Erdut Agreement, was constructed. For example, female participants in a group interview stated that at the time, even Croats who were in favour of reconciliation were called derogatory names (i.e. “Chetniks” and similar), and such an impression remains today. The analysis, however, showed that this was not the case with the public media. The image of the enemy is evidently formed in some other way (by word of mouth?, far removed from the public eye?, through special activities?) and, as the authors themselves state: “What is characteristic of propaganda is that it is difficult to spot, which is exactly where its greatest power lies.” (Barčot Marija and Labaš Danijel, *Mediji i ratetički izazov. Tiskovni mediji u Domovinskom ratu na primjeru Vukovara 1991.*, page 201). This issue remains to be addressed in some future study.

3. Integrating Gender in Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform⁴

The study deals with security sector reforms in post-conflict countries, by integrating a gender-sensitive approach and the role of civil society groups in these processes. It asserts the incidence of violence in post-conflict societies to be higher than preceding the conflict and promotes a holistic approach to the problem – through state/security system institutions (justice and penal institutions addressing war crimes etc.) and the involvement of civil society organisations and activists. It builds upon a number of declarations and resolutions, especially the UN Security Council Resolution 1325. The establishment of a (legal and political) security system represents a basis for reconciliation and the restoration of trust/peace; “In post-conflict contexts (...) Transitional justice mechanisms, such as truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) and special judicial processes to address crimes committed in the conflict, are increasingly seen as a necessity to promote national reconciliation and cohesion.” (Bastick Megan, *Integrating Gender in Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform*, Geneva 2008, page 4). Although the text analysed territories affected by the so-called 1990s Balkans conflicts, i.e. Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the findings are nevertheless relevant for Croatia as well. The study strongly advocates the participation of women and the integration of gender equality principles in the reconstruction of post-war societies.

⁴ *Integrating Gender in Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform*, author Megan Bastick, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces; Geneva 2008

The conclusions of the study which are relevant for our research are: - that a security sector reform is critical to the process of reconciliation and rebuilding; - that it covers all state institutions (primarily justice and penal institutions), but also depends upon the involvement of civil society organisations and other relevant sectors in the processes.

Methodology and research approach

The **general methodology and research approach** of the study is empirical, i.e. involves data collection and analysis, while theoretically it includes a study of relevant reading materials, as well as a parallel analysis of three other research studies (two books and a research paper published in a conference proceedings), all of which are of special relevance to our research topic. The research also encompassed a **case-study** of a newspaper report on Vukovar (under Bibliography and Sources).

The research methodology combines a survey of **theoretical research** involving: consultation of reading materials and documentary records and the investigation of main theoretical sources, i.e. studies dealing with the project topic, followed by their comparison with the results obtained through our empirical research.

The following **empirical research methods** have been used: in-depth interviews (with 11 participants of peace processes, i.e. female participants in the reconciliation processes from - (in Croatia :) Vukovar, Slavonia, Zagreb; (in Serbia :) Belgrade, Vojvodina); a group interview (with five female peace activists and participants of the process of peaceful reintegration); a survey has also been conducted involving 115 respondents (using a purposive sample: persons living in or otherwise related to Slavonia), along with a content analysis of 20 texts published in three conference proceedings dedicated to Vukovar, a case study of a newspaper report on Vukovar published by *Novi list* and the inspection of several web and TV reports and recordings (under “Sources”).

The results of our empirical research were then analysed, using a comparative method of valuation, with the results obtained through the study of theoretical research findings. Such a method proved to be a very good instrument of data control, with the additional benefit of confirming the obtained results and conclusions.

Finally, we engaged in **summarising results and drawing conclusions**, all of which have been presented in the final part of this paper.

Summarising results

A – The power and potential of the culture of peace – survey and interviews

Through an online Google survey, we obtained the responses of 115 survey participants. The sample was purposive and included persons with a direct interest in the Eastern Slavonian territory, namely those living there or otherwise associated by family or other types of relations. Given the objectives of the research, the survey was primarily sent out to women's organisations and female peace activists in the area and throughout Croatia. The network later expanded when some of the participants individually shared the survey further.

It is interesting to note that a majority of the respondents agreed upon the following: that the Erdut Agreement had failed to achieve reconciliation between the members of the two ethnic groups (87.4%); that the state had played a weak role in the reconciliation of the population (64% of them claimed that it had done nothing at all and 36% stated that it had only partially participated in reconciliation efforts). A similar structure of answers was obtained for the question regarding the role of religious organisations in reconciliation. The image, however, notably shifted for the better when it came to the topic of women's civic group activities and that of peace organisations. As much as 46% of the respondents answered this question affirmatively, even mentioning a number of female peace activists by name, such as Ljiljana Gehrecke, Katarina Kruhonja, Dijana Lazić Antunović and others.

It is encouraging to note that more than 90% of respondents stated that they associated with members of the other ethnic group and that their opinion of them was either extremely positive or positive (a total of 83%).

At the same time, they consider changes in politics (83%), common schools (72%), common social and leisure activities and civic initiatives (50%) as being essential for the successful renewal of the reconciliation process.

The survey indicates the existence of a significant reconciliation potential (the fact that as much as 93.7% of respondents pointed out the need to establish common social and leisure activities) and highlights the central role of the state in reopening of the process (through policies and schools).

Two interviews have been conducted – a live group interview with five women interviewees and a written interview on a sample of 11 female respondents. In both cases, the interviews involved a purposive sample of interviewees, taking only into consideration those persons who were in some way associated with the processes which were the focus of the research, being, above all, female peace activists.

The interviewees had either witnessed or participated in the process of so-called peaceful reintegration and were thus able to provide well-informed comments on its implementation and the atmosphere surrounding it. Some of their statements were: - Civil servants involved in the implementation process for peaceful reintegration were, at the time, introduced as peace workers. – Those on the Croatian side felt at that time, like “winners.”. –Mothers and the defenders of Vukovar opposed this process. - Ana Kvesić: “Kruhonja lead reconciliation workshops – it was there that I met a policeman from Negoslavci (Serb territory) who had a small child, he lived in Borovo Naselje, and his child couldn't play there (it was a defenders' residential building). You could see what was coming then and there, what kind of divisions were at work. They made fun of the Serbs that had stayed behind.” - Nadežda: “At the time we were preoccupied with demonstrations to overturn the (war) government, Jelena Šantić would come to Croatia to work with the people, Nataša Kandić, too.” -Dijana: “I was in Vukovar at the time. The signing of the Agreement meant a great deal to us, but the people had no information. –The first thing you could see was the Croatian Office - people were waiting in line to get documents, while others threw things at them, calling them names. The women who supported reconciliation and were actively engaged in the process in Vukovar were: - Katarina Kruhonja (Centre for Peace, Osijek), Gordana Stojanović from the Central Baranja organisation from Bilje, Ankica Mikić - Centre Vukovar; Gehrecke became actively involved in '96, first informally and then by organising the European House of Vukovar in 1998; and Bojanka Metikoš – a brave young girl from Group 484 (Belgrade), *Baranja* from Bilje. All of these organisations are still active today, although in a smaller scale. By mid 1997 I got involved in a NED project, and we were active in the field. We went to the villages, in three teams: Vukovar, Osijek and Beli Manastir”. Ana: “Threats were being made to people.”

The interviewees agreed that there had already been a gap between the two ethnic groups, appearing as “enemy sides” during the armed conflict. “Reconciliation” took place only at an individual level – we are not familiar with the details of particular cases, but they do exist.

Individual interviews have been conducted by means of written questionnaires (multiple answer questions) and subsequent personal interviews with some of the interviewees.

The results presented show that a majority of them (80%) lived in Slavonia during the peaceful reintegration process. (Q1); the same percentage of them (80%) participated in reconciliation activities (Q2).

All respondents (100% of them) are familiar with the names of women and organisations active in the reconciliation process (Q3).

No more than 45% of the respondents are familiar with the participation of religious organisations (Q4).

That politicians impeded the reconciliation process is an answer given by a 100% of the respondents; next in line were religious organisations and the media with 90% (as impeding the reconciliation process), and mutual distrust received 60% (Q5).

A full 100 % of the interviewees stated that a change in politics is required to accelerate the reconciliation process, followed by common schools (with 90%) and adequate psychosocial support for the population as well as civic initiatives – pointed out by 60% of the respondents (Q6).

We find it important to highlight the enthusiasm expressed by all of the interviewees with respect to the possibility of renewed reconciliation activities. They believe that the potential for groups and individuals is extremely high and that a culture of non-violence, peace and peaceful coexistence may, with governmental support, achieve significant results. Moreover, all have expressed their readiness to participate again in such programs.

B – Media analysis: a discouraging image

Our content analysis of the media covered 20 texts, published in three conference proceedings, on various web sites and in the *Politička misao* journal. The texts in question were published in three conference proceedings volumes dedicated to the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region, with – for the sake of objectivity – the European House of Vukovar as the publisher of two volumes and the Vukovar subsidiary of the Ivo Pilar Institute being the third.

In the course of content analysis, we asked three groups of questions – on the presence of women’s peace groups, the presence of religious organisations and the presence of national/local politics within the texts. The conducted analysis is primarily quantitative, focusing on the number of references and quantity of text dedicated to a particular issue.

The content analysis showed that women’s groups appeared within five texts, religious organisations participating in the process of reconciliation within two of the texts, whereas information on public politics was to be found in 18 of the texts, with the social and political context being equally covered by all. When referring to the quantity of text, women’s groups active in the peace process were allocated 1 page and 7 lines of text, religious groups 1 page and 5 lines, while national and local politics received no less than 56 pages and 18 lines of allocated text. Only one of the analysed texts contained no references to any of the categories mentioned above.

It is not difficult to observe that the activities of both women’s and religious organisations in the scope of the peace process were inadequately covered in analytic articles, even when they addressed this particular issue alone. To sum it up, not only have the enormous efforts of both civil society and religious organisations (and individuals) received inadequate acclaim by the media, which should not have been the case, under any standard of reporting. Meanwhile, it would even be safe to say, based on the conducted media analysis and the comparison with the results obtained from surveys and interviews, that this enormous potential and contribution to social stability has been neglected, minimalised and eventually – nullified, even politically. On the other hand, an enormous civic potential is also evident and ready to be activated in order to transform the situation for the better.

Case study: A city of memories or a city of the future?

In search of a more balanced image of media coverage for Vukovar itself, given the stereotype under which Vukovar is typically depicted by the media, primarily as a city of two conflicted ethnic groups (the Serbs and the Croats), we set out to analyse a comprehensive newspaper report dedicated to Vukovar.

Novi list – newspaper supplement published on 18. November 2017 – “Vukovar Remembrance Day“

The analysed report was published as a magazine supplement of the daily newspaper mentioned above on the anniversary of the fall of Vukovar. It contains two interviews – one with a former government minister (Ministry of Internal Affairs) and the other with the head of the Town Museum of Vukovar. An interesting detail in this context is that the “museum exhibition in exile” has managed to preserve the memories and the identity of the town and its’ inhabitants from before the war. A detailed article is dedicated to the faults and failures of the Hague tribunal, followed by a critical comment and two substantial texts on former refugees from Vukovar, who are today citizens of Rijeka. The supplement attempts to provide some insight into the topic of Vukovar by viewing it from various perspectives. In doing so, it preserves the “official, public interpretation” of the war, the fall of the town and the circumstances surrounding it, thus maintaining the image of a victim-town. Balance is subsequently restored through powerful messages on peace, the future and messages of reconciliation by ordinary people. No mention has been made of any CSOs (women’s, peace or any other civic group) or any religious organisations, so the voices of the citizens of Vukovar make up for their absence.

The report acknowledges the civil potential for peace and testifies to the fact that politics turned a deaf ear to such expectations (insufficient governmental involvement), thus confirming the need for systematic work on reconciliation.

Since our research was conducted precisely during Vukovar remembrance days, we chose from a wide array of other media pieces the TV program entitled “Vukovar – a place of memories”, as broadcast by the Croatian HRT on 12.11.2017 at 13:30 PM.

The TV report was presented in the form of a group interview, with the Reverend Petar Ante Perković (parish priest in Aljmaš at the outbreak of war) as one of the participants. He speaks about calling both Orthodox and Catholics for prayer over the radio – inviting them all to pray together “for this not to turn into something horrible and big” (since the events at the time were still seen merely as incidents). Another interviewee is Father Marko Malović, a Franciscan friar who actively participated in the reconciliation program in Ilok after the war. Women who participated as defenders in the Homeland War also took part in the interview: Both Sandra Horvat Mišur (as the youngest among them, who was only 14 at time and witnessed her father being killed) and Violeta Grdić Eta estimate that although there were approximately 1400

women defenders, no related records exist, there is no association of female veterans, and no socio-political influence from their active participation during the war.

The TV report lead to the conclusion that “a voice of reason” actively exists on the territory of Vukovar, accompanied by constant efforts at reconciliation (simultaneously co-existing with the battle to defend the city), and that this part of the story is quite unknown to the public, much like the roles of women both in the city's defence and in its reconciliation efforts.

The report also confirms the hypothesis on the virtual non-existence of media coverage regarding the involvement of religious believers in peace efforts, as well as a media (and public) void of sorts when it comes to the participation of women, even as defenders in the Homeland War (also confirming a failure on the part of the government).

Comparison of results

A split reality

The research data, as well as the comparison with the presented theoretical sources, evidently indicate a polarization of the state and society on the Slavonian and Vukovar territory, consisting in an enormous potential for peace lying in the hands of the civil society, which can, paradoxically, only be activated by instruments of the state. Let us compare our findings with the theoretical sources consulted:

The main conclusions of the “Building Dialogue” study are concerned with the need to continue, intensify and strategically define reconciliation activities; the study also detects the existence of an enormous peace potential within the civil society, coupled by a lack of involvement and effort by the state.

All three of the main conclusions of the study coincide with the conclusions of our research.

Based on a comparative analysis of our (empirical) results and based on the results of the study we can conclude that the image of the enemy has been maintained, and that precisely this image – built through aggression during the war but also through war and post-war propaganda, by methods which remain to be explored further – represents one of the greatest obstacles to reconciliation, i.e. the restoration of trust. Attempts in this direction are being made by Ana

Kvesić, for example, who has been trying to refute various “fabrications” and almost incredible stories (e.g. see the video “Slavkova pekara” (Slavko’s Bakery) listed below) through live conversations with people.

The information and expectations of our research have also been proven correct with respect to the state not having performed the necessary reform which would accelerate the process of reconciliation and reconstruction.

In recent years, there has been a rise in the awareness of the Erdut Agreement as a significant model for peace methodology with respect to other, military options (such as Operations *Storm* (Croat. *Oluja*) and *Flash* (Croat. *Bljesak*)). The Erdut Agreement has reached legal *acquis*, mostly due to the development of recent conflicts in the world, particularly those in the Ukraine. This Agreement has become a part of the legislative corpus of Croatia, but it is also available for implementation elsewhere, wherever applicable, which means that it has become a part of the European (and international) *acquis* in the field of peace-building!

Taking into consideration the obtained results of this research, based on the methodology applied, and through the method of comparison of our own insights with the insights of other sources (Annex No. 8) the following main conclusion may be drawn:

The principal consequence of the evident standstill in the reconciliation process appears to be a sort of “reality layering” by splitting facts into layers of rational and irrational dimensions: The **rational dimension** of the reconciliation standstill confirms, through all methods applied, an evident failure of the state and its institutions to provide an institutional and legal framework which would enable further development in the reconciliation process and the restoration of trust, thus representing a path to the renewed prosperity of this local community. The fact that the mechanisms concerned fall within the exclusive competence of the state justifies the expectations expressed by our respondents with respect to both local and national authorities, as well as the negative marks they received (a 100% agreement in our surveys and interviews). This is confirmed, in particular, by the UNDP study (Building dialogue) as an independent source. To re-establish trust, it is necessary for the state to provide an appropriate security system, along with mechanisms of cooperation with the civil society, with the special aspect in regards to women; as both victims of war and participants in the reconciliation process.

At the same time, numerous reconciliation activities have been developed by many individuals and organisations (both women's and religious ones), which have received no social acknowledgment at all. This fact is made blatantly evident by the media content analysis in which only five texts (i.e. 10% of the total number) referred to activities of women's peace organisations and no more than two texts (i.e. 4.5%) addressed the peace work of religious organisations. On the other hand, studies used as a basis of comparison for this analysis, as well as the interviews conducted within our research (especially the one with Katarina Kruhonja) substantiate that hundreds of persons have participated or been involved in some kind of peace activity. The media and politics (i.e. the state) have, nevertheless, failed to support this kind of engagement and the inherent potential for change.

The Erdut Agreement, i.e. the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region, accomplished a single political goal – the reintegration of territory. All later efforts by the state were only aimed at strengthening their own political positions, whereas the process of reintegration of the people and of social reconstruction of the local community was passively left to run its course, without any control or support. This has, on the other hand, resulted in the development of the other dimension of the process, referred to as the irrational dimension.

The **irrational dimension** of the process standstill arose from a gap between the declarative and actual activity of the state, thanks to which the reconstruction of reality was – as peace activist Katarina Kruhonja puts it – left to an “arena of political gladiators”, rarely offering anything other than quite shallow and primitive playing with “war fears”, and religiously insisting on the division between the two ethnic groups and on building of a strong image of “the enemy.” The local leaders of both communities have set themselves apart from the interests of the population, leaving the people to their own devices to tackle the ill-effects of social division which they must face on a daily basis. War images are constantly renewed among the population, messages of victims are repeated, and a heritage of war is misused for political manipulation. The perpetuation is accomplished through the creation of almost mythological images of “the enemy”. Such a spurring of animosity and a total lack of trust is effectively blocking cooperation and contributing to the political and economic stagnation of the entire community. The people are trapped in a gap which seems impossible to escape, except by physical extraction from the entire (irrational) situation, which has so far been seen as the only way out.

Through its inertia and failure to take measures which only the state is authorized to implement, the state has left a loophole for the further perpetuation of a violent situation within the society. This situation has not escalated thanks to the peacekeeping activities and efforts of numerous CSOs and the efforts of religious groups which, to this day, remain removed from the public eye, having neither been noted nor acknowledged by politicians. It is therefore appropriate to conclude that– in order to answer the question of how it is possible for peace (i.e. the end of war) to have been achieved and reconciliation to have remained at a standstill, we must conclude that these efforts at reconciliation (civil-female and others, as well as religious groups and organizations) have represented –and still do represent – a nuisance to the interpretative political discourse in regard to the theme of war and national legitimacy of the state. This has been the reason behind the silence of local and national politics and the media on the matter. International cooperation on the local level would have undoubtedly crushed the image of “the enemy” upon which the politics of 'the national state' has been built – which has been the case elsewhere in Europe before us. Thus, governmental activities were reduced to the reintegration of territory, but not the community. This type of politics has, however, reached a wall, which is why a change is necessary, in order to shift away from it. (“This is exactly why ... after the conclusion in the process of peaceful reintegration, the area and the town of Vukovar in particular has failed to activate its socioeconomic development and is often perceived by the public as a place of interethnic tension” – (Bosanac, under Sources below). Similarly, Biljana Gaća (analysed text – under Articles below) concludes: “Peace is really not simply an absence of warfare, but a far deeper and more complex condition, a process that requires systematic and continued work. Peace is not won, it is built; there is no alternative to it as it is the foundation for any kind of development of the community and the human as an individual. It is the basis of the frequently mentioned economic, but also cultural, social, intellectual and any other type of development.” (Under Sources)

CONCLUSION

In order to explore the reasons for a standstill in the peaceful reintegration process of the Croatian Danube region (Slavonia and the town of Vukovar in particular) we conducted an empirical research, consulted relevant theoretical sources and made a comparison of the results obtained through the various research methods. The following hypotheses have been made:

- State politics has failed to address the reintegration of population (settling merely for the reintegration of territory). Even so, according to testimonies of state officials who had been directly involved in the process (Škare Ožbolt, Morić, Vrkić, Stanimirović and others) as well as those of female peace activists (Božićević, Kruhonja, Kvesić, Moro and others), enormous efforts were made towards the normalisation of the situation in the war-torn border territories between Croatia and Serbia. After the initial successes and the reintegration of territory into the Republic of Croatia, stagnation in the process of reconciliation has been observed year after year. Our research has shown a high percentage of criticism directed at the state, as well as a high level of expectations by the population concerning future government activities (85% of the conducted surveys and interviews). The research therefore confirmed the hypothesis under which the state did not insist on the integration of the population but had settled merely for the reintegration of territory.
- The problem cannot be solved “locally” – mediation of the international community is necessary. The research has also demonstrated significant assistance and support by the international community, provided both at the institutional level and through civil activism, which remains today. Given the inherent potential of peace associations, of female and male activists and of the population expressing their wish for safe and peaceful lives, this synergy may be restored. The crucial factor is, however, the evident will and power of the society itself (Joško Morić, at the Vukovar conference – the House of Vukovar, 15.01.2016: "We will reconcile on our own or never again!") No mediation by the international community is necessary to successfully continue the process of reconciliation.
- A static image has been created of a society split on the basis of nationality, showing no potential for reconciliation. A stereotypical image of Slavonia and Vukovar as places of interethnic conflicts has been formed, particularly perpetuated by the media and in political discourse. Research has proven the excellent potential of the society for reconciliation.
- An image of insurmountable opposition between the state and society has emerged (i.e. a strong state vs. a weak society)

- The research, however, unfolds a different image: a strong state and a strong civil society. The problem evidently lies in their interconnection, i.e. the synergy of their competences and agendas within the peace-building program.
- The media has contributed to preserving these divisions, rather than promoting reconciliation. This assertion has been confirmed, especially through the conducted content analysis. The media obviously does contribute in the aforementioned way, by not giving certain topics any space at all (such as the peace activism of groups, women's and religious organisations etc.), or reporting on them only on special occasions, while at the same time giving incidents disproportionately high media coverage.

The following questions have also been raised:

- How is it possible for the *peace plan to have succeeded, and the reconciliation plan not?*
- To what extent has the contribution of women (from civil society organizations, the government, or religious institutions), played a significant role in the restoration of peace?
- Have women continued to play an important role in the subsequent period, during the actual implementation of the peace plan?
- Why did the process come to a standstill and what lessons may be learned by analyzing the situation?
- What types of efforts have been made and how visible are they?, and finally:
- What is the potential for a strong and strategy-based renewal of activities aimed at reconciliation?

Based on the conducted research, the following conclusion may be given as an answer:

The research has confirmed the significant human potential of Slavonia for both the restoration of trust and the actualization of a stable peace. Such peace is also advocated as the ultimate goal of the process of peaceful reintegration is also advocated by one of the analysed articles (Dragan Crnogorac – see source under *Articles*). This inherent potential therefore exists as a factor for peace, and has largely been built through the activities and efforts of women's peace and religious organisations and activists, both from Croatia and abroad, as well as by the

population of the area itself, but equally owing to the initial efforts of the government in the implementation of the so called Erdut Agreement. These organisations are still prepared to work for the wellbeing of their community. In order to accomplish this goal, the state has, along with its institutions and the entire state apparatus, and within the scope of both its internal and foreign politics, taken over the obligation of establishing a system of government-based mechanisms for securing the peace. Our insights, however, indicate that it has failed to complete its task and that both criticism and expectations directed at the state are justified. It is also interesting to note that no process has as yet been initiated to seek political responsibility for the non-fulfilment of these obligations, especially in view of the increasing ill-effects of maintaining the condition of *neither peace nor war*, which have come to be reflected in the emigration of persons from this area to either other parts of Croatia or abroad. It is to be expected for peace organisations to raise these questions in the upcoming period.

It is high time for the enormous human capital contained in the peacemaking potential of Slavonia (and Croatia, for that matter) to be acknowledged and valued accordingly. The persistence of politicians on worn-out national and ethnic concepts is quite a wonder, given the fact that a vast majority of the population wishes for nothing more than peace, work and a normal life (as they themselves have stated). Only such a political power which is able to perceive this potential and willing to stand before it will have a great chance in creating a politically, and every other type of stable future in Croatia.

This human peace potential is still alive, but time is of the essence, given the increasing trends of emigration, especially among the young. It is high time for the state (or the political authorities of the country) to take on their share of the responsibility and seriously engage in the process of reconciliation and reconstruction of trust, precisely as they did 20 years ago when they boldly and resolutely took on their task in the process of peaceful reintegration of Slavonia and Baranja into the Croatian national territory.

In that regard, the research also revealed some possible directions of activity, primarily of the civil society in the Croatian Danube region, but also for Croatia as a whole:

- Lobbying for January 15th to be declared a National Day of Peace and Reconciliation (considering the significance of such symbolism in crushing the myth-based images of the “enemy,” hostility and of the warrior mentality);

- Motivating the young to study the peace process (through scholarships, extracurricular activities, etc.)
- Introducing constant monitoring of the peace process (constant detecting of weak spots and launching of appropriate action for their elimination; keeping track of and informing the public on positive practices; continuation of the mediation process);
- Organising media campaigns and other projects aimed at changing the image of the town in the media
- Publishing the integral text of the Erdut Agreement (in a brochure), accompanied by research analyses and other contents relevant for the process of peaceful reintegration;
- Providing the citizens of Vukovar and other places with the necessary psychosocial support to alleviate war trauma (and stop being prisoners of their past)
- Continuing constant efforts at reconciliation (through institutions, the media, the civil society...; the Building Dialogue study advocates the renewal of the peace Platform 112 – for Croatia Governed by Rule of Law)

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