

### ***3. Struggling for the Right to a Future: Peace Youth Group Danube , Vukovar***

#### **The Post-war Landscape of Vukovar**

In 1991, Vukovar was under siege for full three months, completely destroyed and conquered by the Yugoslav Army and the Serbian paramilitary forces on November 18, 2001, which was accompanied by a massacre of civilian population, prisoners of war and even hospital patients. More than 22 000 non-Serb inhabitants were displaced and around 8000 ended up in prisons and concentration camps throughout Serbia. The town remained under the rule of local Serb self-proclaimed authorities until the signing of the Erdut Agreement in November 1995, followed by the establishment of UN Transitional Administration in the region of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES) and the region's full reintegration into the Republic of Croatia on January 15, 1998. During the two years of UNTAES, deemed one of the most successful UN missions ever of its kind, demilitarization, local elections (1997) and peaceful reintegration into the Republic of Croatia were achieved without major incidents, resulting in a considerably higher percentage of remaining Serbs, in comparison to other parts of Croatia that were reintegrated by means of military operations. At the same time, the processes of confidence building, resolution of property issues and investments into social and economic revitalization have been much slower than needed, considering the severity of devastation and trauma inflicted by the war.

Despite the fact that the town of Vukovar represents the most prominent symbol of war suffering and destruction in Croatia the quality of life of its post-war inhabitants, a half of whom are returnees, has remained the worst in Croatia, with unemployment rate of 37%, incomplete reconstruction of infrastructure, only recently started investments into economic recovery, lack of social life and education opportunities and severe division along ethnic lines marking every sphere of political and daily life in Vukovar.

Its population has dropped by more than 30% since 1991, when Vukovar was a prosperous industrial and trade center of 46000 inhabitants, including 48% Croats, 32% Serbs, 12% Yugoslavs and 8% of other minorities. According to the Census 2001, the population of Vukovar is 31,500, accounting for 8,000 displaced persons, mostly Croats, who have still not returned. The current official estimate is that there are not more than 27,000 people actually living in Vukovar today, a half of whom are returnees and only 7,000 employed, while 30% of displaced persons will most probably never return. The ethnic profile of Vukovar has changed in a manner of consolidation of ethnic groups into the 58% Croat majority and a considerable Serb minority of 32% (same as in 1991), with only 10% of other ethnic groups, in comparison to 18% of minorities and ethnically undecided before the war. While these numbers are reflective of ethnic homogenization, they do not provide insight into actual migrations that have taken place over the past ten years, especially among the Serb population, including those displaced from other parts of Croatia and B-H, for whom Vukovar was an immigration point during the period 1992-96.

Perhaps the most significant gateway to post-war confidence building is the deconstruction of collective guilt, for which the following three complementary processes are instrumental in Croatia: (1) consistent application of the Law on General Amnesty, paralleled by (2) impartial and efficient prosecution of all war crimes in national courts and International Crime Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and complemented by (3) careful initiation of community-based dialogue on hard and complex facts of war atrocities and their consequences on survivors. The 1996 Law on Amnesty, passed by the Croatian Parliament as a prerequisite of peaceful reintegration of the Danube region, is applicable to all involved in armed rebellions during the conflict who did not violate the laws and customs of war and/or who did not commit common crimes such as murder and theft of property. Nevertheless, in reality, Croatian survivors of the war in Vukovar, especially those with severe trauma, have difficulties to accept the difference between amnestied Serbs who were members of the military units on one hand and war crime suspects on the other. For that

reason, transparent and credible processing of war crimes, complemented by a community dialogue on individual war experiences are instrumental for overcoming distrust that is especially strong against amnestied Serbian men who remained in Vukovar.

Inter-ethnic tensions and, even more importantly, the depth and sophistication of mutual isolation between the Serbs and Croats distinguish Vukovar from any other post-war community of Croatia. Even though the divisions are not immediately visible to outsiders, every public space and transaction is ethnically marked, including bars, cafes, most privately owned enterprises, shops, soccer clubs, market stands, churches, schools and even the kindergarten. Citizens of Vukovar still predominantly vote for parties which are perceived as protective of their ethnic interests, as reflected by the structure of the City Council, where the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) has won 48% mandates, followed by 32% mandates of the Independent Democratic Serbian party (SDSS), 8% won by the Croatian party of Rights (HSP) and Croatian Peasants' Party and only 4% or only one mandate by the Social-democratic Party (SDP). The current city government is highly dysfunctional as the 6 HDZ representatives and 3 SDSS representatives rarely manage to reach agreement, except for decisions related to very basic communal needs<sup>1</sup>.

The issue of inter-ethnic distrust is highly politicized, as was the case with the fall of the city coalition government of HDZ, HSP and DC (the "Croatian option") in February 2002, after HSP's vehement objection to the decision that the Serbian and the Croatian kindergartens would physically share the same, newly renovated premises. The tensions rise at the occasion of the anniversary of the fall of Vukovar on November 18 and are additionally fuelled by the politicians, particularly the Mayor Vladimir Štengl (HDZ) who has for the past two years, explicitly warned the Serbs to stay out of the commemoration, as opposed to welcoming gestures of honor of the Croatian victims, such as that of the President of a small party of the Danube Serbs who brought flowers to the tomb of killed Croatian soldiers. As Milorad Pupovac, the Serbian MP has stated, in an interview at the occasion of his visit to Vukovar upon a violent incident between the Serbian and Croatian high school students in March 2003, the local authorities and state institutions, primarily the Ministry of Education, have developed almost no confidence building measures, while political parties use incidents for their own promotion, instead of working on conflict prevention<sup>2</sup>.

The most recent incident that made the national headlines was exclusion of a teenage soccer player from the national junior soccer tournament, with explanation of the organizer, a war veterans' association HVIDRA that "the tournament is held in honor of Croatian defenders and a Serb cannot play here"<sup>3</sup>. Ironically, this blatant act of discrimination took place during Croatia's hosting of a an OSCE – sponsored European conference on the status of national minorities and only a couple of weeks after the visit of the Pope to Dalmatia and Eastern Slavonia, whose strong messages about the need to forgive and reconcile prevailed all media and public events. It is no surprise that it turned into a national scandal and invoked condemnations from a range of national and local political leaders and institutions, including the President, the prime minister the Council for Ethnic Minorities, the Croatian Football Union, the national and president of HVIDRA, even the national leadership of HDZ, as well as a prominent president of a war veteran's association from Vukovar. It remains to be seen, however, if the incident will serve as a catalyst of concrete institutional support for systematic deconstruction of inter-ethnic distrust and discrimination in Vukovar and other post-war communities.

A positive aspect of Vukovar public space is media pluralism. In addition to ethnically marked dailies and radio stations, such as *Vukovarske novine*, *Hrvatski vukovarski radio* and *Radio Dunav*, there

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<sup>1</sup> Official website of the City of Vukovar [www.vukovar.hr](http://www.vukovar.hr)

<sup>2</sup> "Nitko ne radi na obnovi povjerenja u Podunavlju". Interview with Milorad Pupovac in *Večernji list*, March 29, 2003. <http://www.vecernji-list.hr/2003/03/29/Pages/nitko.html>

<sup>3</sup> "Dječaku zabranili igrati nogomet jer je Srbin", *Večernji list*, July 2, 2003. [www.vecernji-list.hr/2003/07/02/Pages/djecaku.html](http://www.vecernji-list.hr/2003/07/02/Pages/djecaku.html)

are several inclusive, interactive public fora, such as a transnational website [www.vukovarac.net](http://www.vukovarac.net), and a strongly citizens' oriented e-zine [www.vukovarski-glasnik.com](http://www.vukovarski-glasnik.com), initiated by the regional branch of the Liberal Party (LS). Through its Vukovar correspondent Marija Molnar, a renowned peace activist and other journalists, the regional daily *Glas Slavonije* publishes critical articles on politicization of ethnic relations in Vukovar and regularly reports on Vukovar civil initiatives. Interestingly, considering the high degree of sensationalism in the Croatian media, the stories on post-war reality of Vukovar, published by leading national dailies, primarily *Večernji list* and *Vjesnik*, as well as weeklies *Feral Tribune* and *Globus*, are mostly well-researched and balanced, often presenting views of ordinary citizens, especially youth. The visibility of difficult issues and their different interpretations can be viewed as an opportunity for dialogue and search for more constructive and effective approaches to the post-war social and economic reconstruction of Vukovar.

The main pre-war industrial enterprises of Vukovar – Borovo, Vuteks and Vupik – have collapsed, accounting for tens of thousands of lost jobs. Vukovar is the only town in Croatia where privatization of housing is an unresolved issue, hence impeding access to credit and availability of business premises. During the period 1998 – 2001, reconstruction was carried out in a protracted manner, by means of solidarity investments of other Croatian counties. Systematic economic revitalization of Vukovar started at the beginning of 2002, when the Government set up the Fund for Reconstruction and Development of the City of Vukovar, based on the special Law on Reconstruction of Vukovar<sup>4</sup>.

Guided by the urgency of structural reforms of the local economy and prevention of brain-drain, the Fund has initiated more than twenty economic and infrastructure development projects, including the creation of two tax-free economic zones, a business incubator, a local guarantee agency, co-financing of a center for entrepreneurs, subsidies and loans for business start-ups, a University scholarship program Vukovar youth, promotion of investment opportunities and several urban planning and communal reconstruction projects. The Fund synchronizes its efforts with several ministries, local authorities as well as international assistance programs, among which the CARDS Quick Impact Facility (QIF) Program, implemented by UNDP/UNOPS<sup>5</sup>. Considering the gravity of economic problems of Vukovar, requiring a creation of a completely different, currently non-existent economic structure - grounded in a vibrant SME sector and efficient, privatized agricultural and textile industries - the results of this uniquely comprehensive approach to economic development will only be visible over a period of several years, even a decade. Nevertheless, the current programming of the Fund – which does not seem to pay adequate attention to potential benefits of enhanced trust and strengthened social networks for economic growth of Vukovar, where customers' and employers' choices are largely guided by ethnic and political affiliations. The key challenge of integrating social, economic and physical reconstruction of post-war communities, with the objective of eliminating the root causes of conflict and underdevelopment, hence remains unresolved in the post-war reconstruction and development policy of Vukovar, the first and only of its kind in Croatia.

Similarly to the local media space, most citizens' self-organizing in Vukovar takes place mostly along ethnic affiliations, there are also a handful of organizations focusing on the promotion of inter-ethnic cooperation, as well as several traditional humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross and Naša djeca that serve all ethnic groups but put no special focus on confidence-building. The two main types of civic initiatives co-exist, with little mutual exchange. Croatian-oriented NGOs in Vukovar include associations of war veterans, widows of war veterans, parents of imprisoned and missing fighters, survivors of concentration camps and associations of pensioners and several

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on the Fund for Reconstruction and development of Vukovar, see [www.fond-vukovar.hr](http://www.fond-vukovar.hr). For Law on Reconstruction of Vukovar, see Narodne novine 44/2001. [www.nn.hr](http://www.nn.hr)

<sup>5</sup> For more on Quick Impact Facility/CARDS Program in Croatia, see [www.qif.hr](http://www.qif.hr)

cultural societies. It is apparent that most of these NGOs provide safe space for the most traumatized survivors of the war, which may also result in their isolation and protracted victimization. Serbian-oriented NGOs are far less numerous and visible, except for cultural associations such Prosvjeta. There is one association of Ruthenians and Ukrainians, minorities with minimum political relevance, due to their small number.

NGOs that explicitly promote inter-ethnic cooperation and human rights are very few but each of them has a specific expertise and focus, hence they can potentially complement and support each other in an effective manner. At the same time, despite OSCE's efforts of enhancing organizations among local NGOs, there is a tendency of only sporadic, functional collaboration on specific projects (e.g. current joint education for high-schools students organized by PRONI Center for Social Education and Youth Peace Group Danube) or around sharing of premises (e.g. Europe House Vukovar and VIMIO often offer their space for workshops and public events organized by other organizations). As much as it seems logical that their strong mutual reliance and creation of a joint public image through coordinated public actions would be beneficial for strengthening the political positioning of peace-oriented segment of the Vukovar civil society, there is an apparent lack of mutual responsiveness when it comes to lobbying the local authorities for greater inclusion of the peacebuilding agenda into the local development plans or making political public statements against particular cases of discriminatory practices, violence or incompetence of local politicians. Similarly to other environments in Croatia, such dynamic might be due to heavy burden of running particular projects, experienced by each NGO as well as general sense of relative powerlessness regarding the overall positioning of the peace organizations in Vukovar.

Center for Peace, Legal Advice and Psychosocial Support Vukovar mostly provides legal aid related to return issues (citizenship, social rights, property return, tenancy rights) and human rights, directing citizens to the Ombudsman's Office and OSCE, where necessary. It has also conducted house and community visits with the purpose of informing more isolated citizens on their rights and has organized psychosocial workshops for children. Project of Civic Democratic Initiatives (PGDI, Projekt građanskih demokratskih inicijativa) runs an information club for of Vukovar, where they can read newspapers. BOSINO (acronym for Briga o starim i onemoćalim osobama i.e. Care for the Elderly and Weak Persons) provides social care to the most isolated and poorest households regardless of their ethnicity. Over the past six years of its continuous, mostly voluntary work, the group has made a real difference in numerous lives of the most deprived citizens of Vukovar and is highly respected as one of the most useful local NGOs.

Europe House Vukovar (Europski dom Vukovar), founded in 2000 and led by an enthusiastic woman highly committed to inter-ethnic cooperation, has set realistic and practical goals of improving the quality of life of the citizens of Vukovar, as a prerequisite of their active interest in European integrations and peacebuilding<sup>6</sup>. For that reason, the Europe House Vukovar has taken a practical approach to the preparation of Vukovar citizens for European integrations, by organizing health education, school of amateur painting and exhibitions of local artists, education and supervision of organic food production and support of the first local inter-ethnic children's dance group Venera. In addition, Europe House has organized a course "Education for Europe", including legal aspects of European integration, management and foreign languages. It regularly holds public lectures on issues of reconciliation, economic development, sustainable development and European integrations. Differently enough from its counterpart organization located in Zagreb, and despite the outstanding challenge of predominant apathy, Europe House Vukovar has invested considerable efforts into reaching out to other NGOs and citizens of Vukovar in order to create a dynamic public space where an optimistic vision of the future of Vukovar can gradually be generated and attention

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<sup>6</sup> For more information, see [www.ehvu.org](http://www.ehvu.org)

focused on creative aspects of life. An important indicator of their success is a high number of volunteers, especially youth, engaged in various activities of the Europe House Vukovar.

PRONI Center for Social Education (PRONI Centar za socijalno podučavanje), is an Osijek-based NGO active throughout Croatia that promotes youth activism by means of structured education for youth workers and support for their start-up of youth clubs in deprived, mostly post-war communities<sup>7</sup>. The organization was created in 1997, based on the Northern-Irish model that has become internationally recognized as a cost-effective, alternative way of stimulating social entrepreneurship of youth and their mobility. PRONI has a local branch in Vukovar, which runs training program for youth activists, including members of the local Youth Peace group Danube, with whom it has recently applied to the Institute for the Protection of Family Maternity and Youth for funding an education program for high-school students in Vukovar. PRONI is strongly supported by OSCE Mission Croatia, including funding and public acknowledgement of its contribution to social integration in post-war communities. At the same time, PRONI's work is relatively invisible in the public, as the group mostly focuses on specialized education for youth and is less engaged in actions that directly communicate with a broader circle of Vukovar citizens and question the local power relations.

Vukovar Institute for Peace Research and Education (VIMIO, Vukovar institut za mirovna istraživanja i obrazovanje) was founded in 2000 as an initiative of the Austrian Study Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR) within a long-term project called Rebuilding the Multi-ethnic Society in Croatia, sponsored by the Austrian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. With a specific niche in-between the governmental and nongovernmental actors, VIMIO's mission is to contribute to the long-term process of reconciliation, renewal of confidence and extension of inter-ethnic tolerance in Croatia, particularly in the Croatian Danube Region through peacebuilding research, education and training, information dissemination and direct facilitation of cross-border and inter-ethnic cooperation with schools and NGOs from Serbia and B-H<sup>8</sup>. Over the past three years, VIMIO has organized specialized education in psycho-social assistance, conflict transformation, public lectures and international conference on peace research, held under patronage of the Croatian Ministry of European Integrations; and 2001 conference on. Its main peace research projects have focused on methodologies of psychosocial assistance to the war survivors; opportunities and obstacles to return, through Beneficiary Identification and Return Co-ordination Project of the Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB), a lead implementer of the European Programme for Reconstruction and Return in Croatia<sup>9</sup>; and examination of social distance among youth of Vukovar.

Considering its multifold mission and strong external support, VIMIO has a significant potential of growing into a leading regional peace policy research and resource center, catalyzing collaboration, collecting information and providing logistical and conceptual support to the local community-based peacebuilding initiatives. However, at present, it is still not recognized as an instrumental peacebuilding resource center at the local and national level, as its direct, daily engagement with other local peace organizations and policy makers in Vukovar and Croatia is insufficiently intense.

### ***Peacebuilding Efforts of the Youth Peace Group Danube (MGMD)<sup>10</sup>***

Despite the fact that the Youth Peace Group Danube has a smaller capacity, in terms of budget, managerial competence, in comparison to several other peace-oriented NGOs active in Vukovar, especially VIMIO, Europe House and PRONI Center for Social Education, it has been selected as a case study of a community-based peacebuilding initiative that grew out of the need of local youth to change their reality, without any direct and substantial initial external support. It is one of the

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<sup>7</sup> For further information on PRONI Center for Social Education, see [www.proni.hr](http://www.proni.hr)

<sup>8</sup> For further information on VIMIO, see [www.free-vk.hinet.hr/vimi](http://www.free-vk.hinet.hr/vimi)

<sup>9</sup> For further information and final project report, see [www.asb-ec.hr](http://www.asb-ec.hr)

<sup>10</sup> MGDM-acronym for the name of the group in Croatian/Serbian *Mirovna grupa mladih Dunav*.

oldest peace-groups in Vukovar that has managed to sustain itself over the past eight years, despite fluctuation of membership and lack of professional management. Most importantly, its strong activist orientation, reflected in the immediacy of its practices that are driven by inspiration of individual group members, community needs and acute political issues, distinguishes the Youth Peace Group Danube as a vital generator of transformation of the Vukovar reality, featured by lack of initiative, pessimism and social static, strongly determined by the overwhelming sense of war trauma and post-war deprivation.

The Youth Peace Group Danube was created in late 1995 by a few young men who lived in Vukovar during the Serbian rule and decided to stay there during and upon UNTAES. Already in 1996, they established contact with Croatian youth activists in Vinkovci, a border town under Croatia authorities. As Marija Molnar, the organizer of those very first direct encounters explains, that was a chance to confront and overcome mutual prejudices and fears of the reintegration process: "It was like checking if those little Serbs over there on the other side had horns growing on their heads and vice versa". The Peace Youth Group Danube was registered in 1997 with the primary purpose of creating *a safe space* where local youth of Vukovar, regardless of their nationality, could enrich their depleted daily routines with arts, sports, non-formal education and, most importantly, a sense of hope and togetherness. Over the past eight years, the group has maintained its volunteer base, serving as a youth club and a catalyst of different cultural, political and community development actions, connecting citizens of different ethnicities.

While the group's active membership base revolves and changes size every couple of years, as the youth get older or move, several former leaders have continued to provide advice to the current core 15 activists in their teens and early twenties, of Serbian, Croatian and well as Bosniak ethnicity. An elected managing board and a president who make joint decisions, run the group. In practice, individual members often have full freedom to start activities of their own interest. A broader circle of steady supporters includes 50 youth, while its monthly outreach includes around 800 youth and other citizens (how). The group is well networked with Croatian and international youth and peace organizations, especially the Austrian Peace Service that has been sponsoring Austrian volunteers to live and work with MGMD for periods of six months to a year. Its main funder has been a German solidarity foundation Die Schwelle, covering the group's running costs and the purchase of the premises, as well as several domestic and international donors, such as Care International Croatia, Open Society Institute, EU, the Croatian Government, contributing to a total 2002 budget of 24 000 Euro and 2003 budget of 40 000 Euro. Among local sponsors, the group gets in-kind donations from a local shop and equipment for public space reconstruction from the communal works company. From the very beginning, the group members' explicit non-conformism with overriding social norms of Vukovar has made them visibly different and hence vulnerable to labeling, suspicions and marginalization. For the Croats, they were "pro-Serb"; for the Serbs, they were "a sect", while both the Serbs and Croats badmouthed them as "drug addicts" or "foreign spies".

At the same time, the group's "theory of practice", combining vibrant counter-cultural and anti-political activism with visible and real commitment to the community's well-being and nonviolence has made them resilient to simplistic categorizations by local power centers. Having successfully created a unique, authentic public space in Vukovar, reflective of the local youth's strive for safety and freedom, grounded in creativity of individuals and shared values of peace, nonviolence and right to diversity, the Peace Youth Group Danube has become an unavoidable social actor of post-war Vukovar - suspected of disturbing and, at the same time, respected for transforming the local social order of two parallel, politically and ethnically homogeneous communities, fuelled by fear, pain, poverty and hatred.

The following is how the MGMD's members have depicted their own reality:

*Opening issues around ethnic egoisms, such as completely separate education in Croatian and Serbian, and their resolution would alleviate chaos perpetuated by generations of frustrated people who forbid their kids to reconcile...Ignorance is the basis of all our problems, it is dragging us down and we are not even aware of it. Schools and bars are segregated. Except for division on Croats and Serbs, there is also a division between those who remained here throughout the war and those who left and came back. Only the Danube has stayed the same... or perhaps not, just the division is less visible. We often feel we do not belong to anybody... At present, the only thing connecting youth is drugs...Even if people do not have personal problems with people of the other ethnicity, they do not interact, due to impositions from above. We feel like the only lunatics pursuing education about tolerance, for there are so few opportunities for change, and education is one of them.<sup>11</sup>*

### **Transformation at Work**

In 1999, with the help of a donation from CARE International, the group purchased a house close to the town center and turned it into a colorful, yet improvised youth club, with an office, a computer workshop and an adjacent space for gatherings and workshops during Summer months. The restoration is a work in progress, serving as one of the tasks of international volunteer camps that the MGMD organizes at least once a year, in cooperation with the Volunteer Center Zagreb and a network of volunteer organizations throughout Europe. The youth club is open in afternoon and evening hours, from Thursday until Monday, to fit youth who would otherwise spend time at home or in local bars. It functions as open space for various organized and self-initiated workshops and activities, such as painting, playing music, creating sculptures, juggling, video-production, playing table tennis and partying.

The primary function of the group as a space where deprived youth can counter depression and self-destructive behaviors, by taking control of their lives and filling them with new meanings and contents is reflected in the group's quest for any learning opportunity. Over the past years, courses and have been held in computers, English, communication and conflict transformation skills and various artistic techniques, such as photography, theater, body art painting. Currently, the group members run weekly creative workshops for children. Empowerment workshops have focused on young women's leadership, gender relations, national identities, prejudices and stereotypes. The group members run weekly creative workshops for young children. Te group has hosted and participated in civic education and public discussions on politically relevant topics, especially "get-out-the vote" campaigning, conscientious objection and civil service (of particular importance to young Serbs who are Croatian Army conscripts), European integrations, status of ethnic minorities and sustainable development.

To illustrate the group's readiness to engage in cross-border exchanges and explore diverse topics, the following are MGDM's education activities organized in the period January-May 2003: a week-long theater workshop held in Vukovar and co-organized with the with Open Club Niš from Serbia; a ten-day seminar on creative techniques for conflict transformation for youth in Vukovar, co-organized with the Helsinki Committee Human Rights from Bijeljina, B-H and Society for Tolerance from Bačka Palanka, Vojvodina/Serbia; "Croatian Youth for Europe" promotional campaign of European integrations in five cities in Croatia funded by OSI Croatia; participation of seven youth from Vukovar people in a 10-day photography workshop in Monte Negro organized by Civil Center Budva.

During summer 2003, the group is preparing for a more intense follow-up to the EU promotional campaign of European integrations, initially funded by OSI, which is now sponsored by the Ministry

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<sup>11</sup> Notes from a group interview with MGDM members conducted by Emina Bužikinić, Vukovar, April 17, 2003.

of European Integrations and includes several NGOs in Vukovar, as well as other towns throughout Croatia. It is apparent that activities focusing on the issue of European integrations represent a politically acceptable, non-threatening tool for stimulating social integration across ethnic divides in post-war communities like Vukovar, hence engaging a much wider number of NGOs than activities that explicitly address local ethnic divisions, corruption and lack of development.

Promotion and encouragement of independent cultural self-expression of youth represents an equally important way of transforming the grim and uniform post-war reality of Vukovar. In 1998, MGMTD organized the first ethnically mixed concert after the reintegration process, bringing together punk bands from the Danube region who performed in the basement of the hotel Dunav, a site of a popular disco before the war. A similar punk festival was organized four years later with guest bands from Županja, Slavonski brod and Slovenia in the club's premises, which was interrupted by the police due to noise complaints, as the group's house is located in a residential neighborhood. In addition to punk concerts, the group has also organized techno parties with local and visiting DJs, hence promoting two musical styles that stay in sharp opposition to Croatian pop and Serbian and Croatian disco-folk that dominate Vukovar bars. In 1999, the group put up a photography exhibition "Portraying Former Yugoslavia in 2000 – Five Years after Dayton", a product of creative collaboration with youth peace group Mladi Most from Mostar, B-H and other four youth groups from Sarajevo, Travnik, Brčko, B-H and Novi Sad, Serbia.

As opposed to being exclusively self-focused on youth culture, MGMTD has also directly responded to the most visible needs of the inhabitants of Vukovar – the restoration of public spaces and support to the poor. Ever since 1997, the group has organized annual international volunteer camps to reconstruct children's playgrounds, clean-ups of alleys and a basement of a former Youth Center, the use of which was later denied by the local authorities, despite earlier promises. Each camp has also included concerts, artistic and education workshops and discussions on cross-cultural issues and nonviolence, led by young peace educators from the German organization Children on Stage, Volunteer Center Zagreb and theater trainer, member of MGMTD Dejan Poštić. During summer 2003, in cooperation with the open Club Niš from Serbia, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights from Bijeljina B-H, a youth group from Belišće and Volunteer center Zagreb from Croatia, MGMTD has organized a volunteer camp that will work on the construction of a greenhouse and a children's playground. Together with the Vukovar NGO BOSINO that cares for the elderly and the disabled, the group is currently planning another volunteer camp focusing on free house repairs to the most vulnerable citizens of Vukovar. The project is based on excellent cooperation established with the leader of BOSINO during the 1997/98 series of house visits of youth activists to the elderly. The Youth Peace Group Danube's practical and continuous promotion of voluntary work in community development was recognized by the Government Office for NGOs, which rewarded the group with a certificate of gratitude on the occasion of the 2001 International Year of Volunteers. In order to upscale the infrastructure for youth voluntarism, networking and transfers of knowledge in Vukovar, the future plan of Youth Peace Group Danube is to set up the "International Meeting House", a largely self-sustainable youth hostel with meeting space for different workshops and seminars on peace building, theater, conflict resolution, volunteerism and many different creative workshops.

Public actions and protests are the third track of the group's peacebuilding efforts, which distinguishes them most sharply from other peace-oriented NGOs in Vukovar. No matter how unimportant in numbers of participants, the group's direct actions organized at the occasions of international solidarity days with issues of global concern, such as AIDS, global status of youth and the war in Iraq are important for connecting Vukovar post-war realities with global challenges and thus transforming the focus on one's own victimization into a concern for other people's and nations' suffering. As the regional newspaper Glas Slavonije strongly underlined, the Youth Peace Group Dunav was the only Vukovar NGO, or for that matter, any other local socio-political actor,

that protested against the war in Iraq on February 10, 2003, as part of the national ad-hoc coalition "Dosta je ratova!" that organized the broadest antiwar protests ever in Croatia, spreading to more than 10 Croatian towns. With the main slogan rooted in the local context "We have gone through war and we do not wish it to others!", Vukovar youth activists, who were still children when the war in Croatia was at its peak, have demonstrated their connectedness with the Croatian and the world peace movement and alertness to the key international political issue in the year 2003.

In the sphere of local politics, the group demonstrated its consistent advocacy for nonviolence when it issued a public statement expressing sorrow and condemnation of an unknown bomb attack on the Mayor's house in October 2002. Similarly to the protests against Iraq, MMD was the only Vukovar NGO to speak up against this local act of violence, despite the fact that it does not even enjoy any support from the Mayor who is known for his nationalist politics and suspicions of youth peace work in Vukovar.

As part of the nationally coordinated celebration of the World Day of Youth in April 2003, MGDM organized a day-long action that combined a performance in front of the City Hall, where the activists, equipped with shovels and grabs, symbolically died under the flag with FUTURE written on it; a thorough clean-up of the local natural resort Adica by the Danube, followed by a barbecue and a music event in the evening. The action is a vivid and clear example of MGMD's ability to send a practical, yet strongly political message that the youth of Vukovar, despite the absurdity of belief in any glorious future, considering the destructiveness of the politicians, still intend to carry on, even if alone, picking up the collective garbage of the past and cherishing their own lives.

### **Looking into the Future**

For the future of Vukovar to happen, according to MGDM activists, it is essential that youth become politically active and at the same time included in the local policy planning, so that social and cultural life of the town is enriched with regular cultural festivals, a multimedia center, a renovated cinema, a restored park at the river bank, all of which would also be supported by youth volunteer work.

For that reason, MGDM plans to extend their media outreach and at the same time, find it crucial that they establish links with political leaders who would be committed to lobbying for the interests of the Vukovar youth – among which self-employment and employment are key - in the Croatian parliament and other policymaking institutions. An important step towards youth mobility on the labor market is the promotion of voluntary work, particularly by creating opportunities for interning in public institutions and certifying volunteering as work experience relevant to job applications. The greatest personal wish shared by most members of the group is pursuit of University studies, for which they have no financial resources. They are also strong supporters of the abolition of the national military conscription, which they view as a waste of time for most young men and an obstacle to the loosening of ethnic tensions.

The Youth Peace Group Dunav is a valuable example of self-organized, community initiative rooted in an angered, pained and immobilized environment, the actors of which are the politically marginalized – the Vukovar youth of all ethnicities – who have taken power to meet their own need for more creativity, knowledge, freedom of expression, sense of hope and safety, as well as their community's need for visible signs of post-war recovery; step out of the dominant code of ethnic separation and build relationships with other youth based on shared interests and aspirations; establish an alternative public space, which attempts to influence local political structures and nourishes democratic procedures within its own organization; and promote culture of nonviolence and openness to cooperation.

It is important that local policymakers recognize the MGMDs potentials to contribute to the emerging process of systematic revitalization of Vukovar. In particular, the Fund for Reconstruction and Development of Vukovar could take into account that alliance building with MGMD, as well as

other non-governmental actors in Vukovar, which focus on confidence-building and generation of human and social capital could significantly accelerate the realization of the Fund's plans:

- (1) The group's commitment to the well-being of Vukovar and its youth has already taken the form of concrete, visible volunteer actions, organized despite scarce resources, which make the group *a unique role model for self-initiated, community-based reconstruction*;
- (2) The group's access to youth of different profiles and backgrounds make it a *perfect catalyst of youth mobilization around various development initiatives*, such as culture, non-formal education, stimulation of self-employment or prevention of self-destructive behaviors;
- (3) MGD's critical, yet constructive perspective on the specific needs for investment into the human capital, quality of life and process of inter-ethnic cooperation in Vukovar *make it a valuable contributor to any participatory planning process of projects relevant to youth and peacebuilding*.

Considering that the members of Youth Peace Group Dunav, native to Vukovar themselves, attempt to counteract the predominant spirit of polarization and immobilization from within, external support is instrumental for sustainability of their ambitious efforts to effectively contribute to the transformation of Vukovar into a multiethnic, mobile and creative community.

(1) Acknowledgement of their work by power centers such as central state institutions (e.g. Office of NGOs' certificate), media, national and international NGOs and institutions such as OSCE is an important tool of gaining legitimacy that can counterfeit marginalization by the local power centers (local authorities, churches and nationalist NGOs).

(2) Since the group membership revolves as generations of youth grow up, the organizational learning process of MGD tends to repeat the same beginners' cycles, as every new generation ends up learning the basics of non-profit management from scratch. Therefore, MGD welcomes and needs external mentoring support, such as that provided by Marija Molnar, a former core member of the group and experienced peace activist and journalist, or contributions of international volunteers.

(3) The group has highlighted the value of additional support of activists from other parts of Croatia, both in terms of managerial assistance and injection of fresh energy and enthusiasm, so much needed by Vukovar youth who struggle with systemic depression on a daily basis. For that reason, MGD would benefit greatly from governmental or nongovernmental programs that stimulate mobility and interning within Croatia. Exchange schemes of community-based peacebuilding activists between different regions and organizations would enhance mutual learning and support and hence decrease reliance on external funding and knowledge.

#### **4. Information Technology as a Peacebuilding Tool: ZaMirNET, Zagreb**

##### **History of ZaMir Transnational Network<sup>12</sup>**

ZaMirNET, a national NGO that uses and promotes ICT as a tool for civil society development and peacebuilding is probably the most innovative and subversive peacebuilding practice that has stemmed out of the Antiwar Campaign network and its links with regional and international

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<sup>12</sup> For detailed accounts of the history of ZaMirTransnational Network, see the following articles written by protagonists: Bachman, Eric (1996). *COMMUNICATIONS AID in the post Yugoslavian countries: The origin and development of the ZAMIR TRANSNATIONAL NET (ZTN)*. <http://balkansnet.org/MF-draft/MFF/eric-3~1.htm>  
Skoric, Ivo and Ed Agro (1996-99). *ZaMir Peace Network in the War Zone: The Later History of ZTN, Parts I-IV* <http://balkansnet.org/MF-draft/MFF/latr.htm>

counterparts during acute war and break-down of communication channels in the post-Yugoslav region of early 1990's. Initial steps to enable communication among emerging peace groups separated by the lines of conflict took place in October 1991, when an improvised fax relay system was set up, with the help of international solidarity organizations such as War Resisters International – WRI and International Forum On Reconciliation - IFOR that acted as intermediaries and dispatchers of messages. A turning point was early 1992 when the COMMUNICATIONS AID project for the people in former Yugoslavia was launched by foreign peace groups together with the Center for the Culture of Peace and Nonviolence (Ljubljana), the Anti-War Campaign (Zagreb) and the Center for Anti-war Action (Belgrade), with the objective of setting up an alternative electronic mail system (Bulletin Board System - BBS) that could work on poor quality telephone lines and simple computers, the only available ICT resources at that time in the war stricken post-Yugoslav region.

The key person for the design and installment of the *ZaMir Transnational Network* (ZTN) was Erich Bachman, a Vietnam war-era conscientious objector and experienced peace activist at that time residing in Germany. Through their integration in the worldwide BBS network of the Association of Progressive Communications, Zagreb and Belgrade servers could exchange messages and reach out to the media and peace support organizations throughout the world, despite lack of direct telephone contact and access to Internet. In February/March 1994, ZaMir servers were installed in Ljubljana and besieged Sarajevo, followed by the set up of the Prishtina server ZANA, administered by the independent newspaper Koha in October 1994. The network was considerably improved in spring 1995, when the Zagreb, Sarajevo and Belgrade servers were enlarged and a new server, with direct international telephone access was installed in Tuzla.

The impact of ZTN on the development and sustainability of the post-Yugoslav peace movement during the most intense war period from 1992 until the signing of Dayton agreement in November 1995 is formidable. The network connected and provided training and technical support to more than 1700 peace, human rights and humanitarian workers and independent journalists from all the countries in war, including dozens of local and international NGOs that used this unique communication channel to assist in the search for the missing persons and tracing relatives stuck in war zones, plan joint peacebuilding projects, political campaigns and send out independent news reports and access more than 150 regional and international news conferences. Two international volunteers, Kathryn Turnipseed and Cecilia Hansen, under the project name "Electronic Witches", created the first ZTN training manual for women users ensuring that gender specific barriers to use of ICT would be overcome in the trainings they delivered to hundreds of women activists throughout Croatia, Serbia and B-H. The author of this research was involved in the Volunteer Project Pakrac, the first community peacebuilding endeavor in a fully divided town, undertaken by Antiwar Campaign Croatia and a Serbian peace group MOST and numerous international volunteers. As we could not cross the line of division, nor could we phone our Serbian counterparts, we used ZTN to coordinate our activities throughout the three years of the project. The following are some examples from Ivo Škorić's report on ZTN's role as a solidarity channel, written in February 1996:

*"When Serbian authorities imposed their own directors on the Belgrade newspaper Borba in December, ousted journalists gave the world their side of the story using ZTN. In desperate need of antibiotics last year, Kosevo Hospital in Sarajevo issued an appeal via the network. Operation Rescue (which has nothing to do with the Operation Rescue in the U.S.) got medicine through. When 10 opposition activists from Split were arrested by Croatian authorities and beaten in prison in 1993, supporters sent out daily reports via the net. The beatings stopped. In 1992 a group of young people barricaded themselves in the Hungarian Cultural Center in a small village of Tresnjevac (Oromhegyes) in Northern Serbia refusing to be drafted for the war Serbia waged against Croatia and Bosnia. They declared independence and sovereignty. They assumed a name*

*Zitser Spiritual Republic (Zitser is a term used in a game of pool there, when you get a ball in the pocket in one clean shot). Their anthem was Ravel's Bolero and their coat of arms became a Pizza pie surrounded with three billiard balls. War Resisters League from Hungary (Alba Kor) helped spread the word using Internet. In the effort for them to be able to keep in touch they needed a computer with modem. A New York based group of artists and activists, Neither East Nor West organized a benefit rock concert in CBGB's in November 1993 to raise funds for that purpose. New Yorker later wrote about the event. Today ZSR is on-line: zsr@zamir-bg.ztn.zer.de<sup>13</sup>.*

As the intense war period in B-H and Croatia passed, the telephone lines and direct Internet access became more viable, ZTN did not manage to achieve its goal of adjusting its system to more advanced technology, due to lack of resources and weariness of the core groups of volunteers who kept it going during the difficult war years. Several web-based networking and media outlets have in the meantime emerged in the post-Yugoslav region, Ljudmila, Kontrapunkt, out of which the ZaMirNET in Zagreb has directly built on the values, activist networks and human resources of ZTN.

### **ZaMirNET: ICT, Peace Activism and Good Governance Combined**

Registered in 1999 as a separate NGO and having managed to overcome a severe financial crisis during the transition period from Antiwar Campaign, ZaMirNET currently employs 15 staff in Zagreb and five computer centers in the post-war communities of Kistanje, Obrovac, Drnis, Donji Lapac, and Srb and manages several complex, long-term programs that promote the use of ICT as a strategic tool for civic activism, peacebuilding and social development at the local, national and international levels.

With the mission of "using ICT for transfer and creation of information relevant for civil society development" and fundamental principles of "empowerment, active acceptance of diversity, solidarity and cooperation with individuals and groups devoted to the building of a culture of peace and nonviolence"<sup>14</sup>, ZaMirNET continues to provide web space, email access, technical support and web design services to civic campaigns, networks, organizations, informal initiatives and individual activists. For instance, ZaMirNET provided ICT support to three most visible civic campaigns over the past three years – *Glas 99 (Vote 99)*, a Croatia-wide campaign instrumental ensuring high voter turnout and transparency of the December 1999 parliamentary elections; *Moj glas za pravnu drzavu (My Vote/Voice for the Rule of Law)* in 2001, a massive public protest against nationalists' claims to halt extradition of Croatian military officials to ICTY and *Dosta je ratova!*, the most numerous peace campaign ever in Croatia, against the war in Iraq, that took place in more than 10 Croatian cities and towns over Spring 2003. In addition to providing ICT support, ZaMirNet staff are often engaged in organizing public actions and designing promotional materials – hence combining the spirit of grassroots peace activism from the early 1990's with their sophisticated technical skills. ZaMirNET also hosts over thirty NGO websites and helps maintain four major Croatia-wide feminist, youth, peace and civil society development mailing lists (*cik-cak*, *forca*, *aktiv* and *macuhica*), as well as the feminist mailing *zenska posla* active in Serbia. In addition it provides Internet access and client support to more than 300 NGOs and 500 individual users.

ZaMirNET's civil society e-journal *ZaMirZine*<sup>15</sup> is an interactive media outlet for otherwise hardly available news on youth, peacebuilding, women's rights, gay and lesbian, environmentalist and independent cultural initiatives, combined with select articles and columns on national, regional and international events of relevance to the promotion and protection of human rights, social and economic justice and peacebuilding. With more than 2000 to 10 000 hits a day, ZaMirNET's website

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<sup>13</sup> Skoric, Ivo and Ed Agro (1996-99). ZaMir Peace Network in the War Zone: The Later History of ZTN, Part II. <http://balkansnet.org/MF-draft/MFF/ztninwz2.htm>

<sup>14</sup> ZaMirNET's website <http://www.zamirnet.hr/eng/index.html>

<sup>15</sup> ZaMir Zine <http://www.zamirnet.hr/zine/>

serves as a unique tool for transferring knowledge, information, mobilizing resources and creating relationships among individuals and organizations engaged in peacebuilding at the local, national, regional and international levels.

### **New Tools for Youth Activism**

In cooperation with CARE International, since November 2001 ZaMirNET has developed an innovative education and networking program named MINT<sup>16</sup>, that combines advanced training in ICT skills with human rights and youth organizing issues for fifteen youth groups primarily from rural and small town areas, among which eight are from post-war communities. The purpose of the project is to bridge the existent technological and communication gap between underdeveloped areas and urban centers of Croatia, so that youth from isolated communities get access and knowledge of ICT and get involved with national youth initiatives, such as the current campaign that ensures youth participation in the monitoring and implementation of the National Youth Policy, passed by the Parliament in October 2002.

MINT has taken into consideration both key issues related to the use of ICT by grassroots youth groups – lack of material resources and lack of knowledge. Hence, each youth group has received a free computer, email account, website space and coverage of annual Internet fee. Youth activists have participated in two live trainings in ICT skills, that focused on networking and website development (five groups have set-up their own websites<sup>17</sup>) and five online trainings that combined exploration of Internet as a tool for participatory decision-making and social and economic entrepreneurship (e-governance, e-democracy and e-commerce) with education on NGO management and fundraising, public policy advocacy and human rights issues specific to the Croatian context. The trainings put special focus on youth political and social rights, ethnic minorities, women and sexual minorities. Through five online discussions and an exercise in e-mobilization, the participants applied their new ICT skills and strengthened their mutual ties. Over 2003-04, the MINT program will continue, with inclusion of ten new youth groups and additional contents on the political relevance and know-how of free software.

The cost-effectiveness of MINT program, following the economical approach of ZTN, is evident if the total budget of 90,536 USD is divided by the number of direct beneficiaries - 15 youth groups including a total of 200 core youth activists – showing that for as little as 6000 USD per youth group, or as little as USD 450 per youth activist, ZaMirNET has developed an entirely new online learning and networking software and curricula; delivered minimum 80 interactive hours of education and provided groups with ongoing technical assistance and basic ICT equipment.

### **Community-based Peacebuilding through ICT**

The most challenging aspect of ZaMirNET's current activities has been its engagement in community peacebuilding processes in nine post-war municipalities of Croatia, in the role of the local implementing partner to two major social reconstruction programs initiated by the international donor agencies – USAID's Economic Community Revitalization Program (ECRA), managed by Mercy Corps and EC's Sustainable Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons- Civil Society Project, jointly implemented by Care International, GONG and ZaMirNET. In both programs, ZaMirNET has managed to remain committed to its unique capacity to combine promotion of ICT with the promotion of grassroots activism, expansion of social networks, participatory social development and critical social analysis.

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<sup>16</sup> MINT stands for Mladi i informacijska tehnologija (Youth and IT) <http://www.zamirnet.hr/mint/>

<sup>17</sup> For illustration, see HUK Knin <http://www.huknet.hr>, KAOS Hrvatska Kostajnica <http://www.zamirnet.hr/kaos>, PUŽ Slavonski Brod <http://www.puz.hr/>, Kvarak Križevci <http://www.krizevci-online.hr> and Spirit Rijeka <http://www.spirit-ri.hr/>

ZaMirNET's involvement in the ECRA Program (February 2002- October 2003) has caused a radical leap of 500% in ZaMirNET's organizational budget (from USD 70,200 in 2001 to USD 386,000 in 2002), the doubling of its staff and significant expansion of its activities, as ZaMirNET established five new community computer centers in Obrovac, Drniš, Kistanje, Donji Lapac and Srb. The program has had a significant impact on ZaMirNET's organizational culture, previously determined by participatory programming and responsiveness to the needs of the immediate activist community. Having agreed to the role of USAID's implementing partner as opposed to a grantee, ZaMirNET had to upscale its managerial capacities in order to meet extensive monitoring and reporting obligations, and the need for close supervision and intense implementation of multiple activities taking place in five different locales. ZaMirNET's Zagreb staff also needed to step out of their almost exclusive focus on the needs of peace and human rights activists, as they started building relationships with an array of local actors, including local authorities, school principals, police, firemen, war veteran associations, local businessmen etc. In parallel to strenuous management of the computer centers, ZaMirNET staff, as individuals and as a group, have remained engaged in organization and provision of ICT support to various key national peace and social justice actions, such as weekly street concerts for peace in Afghanistan, the Croatia-wide protests against the war in Iraq, LGBTI campaigns or anarchist initiative of public kitchen that uses food surpluses from supermarkets, named "Food Not Bombs"<sup>18</sup>. Despite the organizational challenges and ethical dilemmas that ZaMirNET has faced during the past two years of its involvement in the two complex foreign assistance programs, the initial benefits of its direct and intense outreach to the post-war areas of Croatia far exceed the drawbacks, mostly related to exceptional organizational stress as the project management requirements and tight timeframe continuously push the staff to the limits of their capacity. As the ECRA program draws to a close, it is evident that tight timeframes and constant anxiety about meeting project targets (e.g. number of beneficiaries and new community initiatives developed as a result of ZaMirNET's presence) cannot significantly hasten the pace of full adoption of new ways of thinking and interacting in the post-war communities, introduced by ZaMirNET. Considering the richness of exposure, however, and potentials for its locally driven continuation, there is space for optimism that ICT will turn into a valuable tool for enhancing local social and economic interactions.

The benefits of the program for ZaMirNET's development are clearly visible. With the funding available from ECRA program, ZaMirNET has been able to invest into the design of new, highly user friendly web-based technologies, including its software for online trainings, one of the first of its kind in Croatia, and creation of the locally specific Content Management System that enables persons with no prior knowledge of web design, like municipal officials or war veterans, to develop and maintain their own websites. Additional funding of Euro 160 000 and opportunity to explore relevance of the these tools in four other communities has been provided by the EC's SRRDP-CS Project, where ZaMirNET's primary role is organization of participatory development of community web portals and citizens' online forums in Glina, Dvor Gračac and Knin. ZaMirNET has also developed sets of new education curricula, in topics that have previously been out of its focus, such as e-commerce, job search strategies, fundraising and NGO management, all of which are relevant

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<sup>18</sup> A vivid illustration of ZaMirNET's immersion in three different worlds – urban-centered peace activism, foreign assistance programming and post-war community life – is the picture of ZaMirNET's project assistant Darko, a dedicated anarchist activist with long hair and a T-shirt with anticapitalist slogans, driving a Chrysler Jeep to the computer center in Obrovac, where he is about to deliver posters on antiwar protests wrapped together with cartridge and new evaluation questionnaires, to the local computer center coordinator, neatly dressed Blaženka, who thinks of her life in terms of "before" and "after" working for ZaMirNET, as she now holds a new profession of computer technician and has become enthusiastic about community organizing and breaking down the indolence of local politicians, especially around women's human rights. Her only worry is that Darko would arrive too late for her to get home in time to take care of her daughter and sick husband, as her role of a housewife has not stopped once she got her new profession.

for the socio-economic development in the post-war communities and could be easily adapted to other communities in the future, with minimum need for additional funding.

Over the past two years, ZaMirNET has devised a new approach to community development, which relies on accessibility of ICT as a way of fostering new community partnerships and enabling local inhabitants to access previously unavailable information about economic and social opportunities in Croatia and abroad. While the main lesson learned from the past two years is the importance of a more realistic time frame if initiated changes were to become sustainable, the following is the overview of the preliminary impact as of May 2003.

Over the past year, over 750 citizens of Obrovac, Drniš, Donji Lapac, Kistanje and Donji Srb have become members of fully equipped computer centers (five PCs, a printer and solid Internet connection<sup>19</sup>), where over 250 of them have received extensive training in computer skills and over 100 have attended the online trainings in human rights, nonviolent communication, NGO management and fundraising, e-commerce, career planning and successful job search. They also engaged in online discussions, among which the topic of sustainable development was particularly interesting for Obrovac high school students involved in environmental protection. At least 100 users have applied their newly acquired ICT in their search for employment (e.g. preparation of job applications and web-search for jobs), up scaling of their private businesses (e.g. accounting for a hairdresser's shop or database development of bee hives) or improvement of their performance at work (e.g. statistical analysis of local police station's performance). For the great majority of them, the computer centers have become an important social space for engaging in collaborative learning with their neighbors, particularly those of the other nationality, with whom they would otherwise have no direct contact, as accounted by a Janjevo Croat settler woman in Kistanje:

*"During the computer course, we were socializing with other nationalities. We were all colleagues, all in the same position of learning new things, sharing what we know, and now we greet each other in the street, for instance when I meet Mrs. Radojka. We would all have coffee together, there was no separation. This is my first such experience of learning together, its was great. There was no such social event before ZaMirNET."*

The focus on new computer skills and investment into the community ICT infrastructure that will remain in the municipalities when ZaMirNET leaves has been purposefully considered as a way of shifting the attention of local residents from the past grievances to future social and economic aspirations:

*" We have correctly observed that over the past couple of years, the primary issue in the post-war areas is economic development, for even when people manage to resolve their housing problems, they need to be able to sustain themselves. That is why we developed a program that would be of interest to all, due to its string focus on the future, future opportunities to gain new education, start and expand business, get more easily employed, hook up your local youth club with remote donors and national youth events. We were very conscious about involving all ethnic groups, we made sure that our local staff would reflect ethnic diversity of their communities and be attentive to the need to stimulate inter-ethnic relations in the centers. We were very explicit about who our target beneficiaries are and for what reasons – women, youth and war veterans, including men who fought in different armies – and we managed to avoid the trap of being accused that we support only one ethnic group. We are happy that we made a step towards greater contact with war veterans, the group that human rights tend to avoid as they are considered the source of all turmoil and inter-ethnic problems. We have managed to break down some of these stereotypes within our own circle."*

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<sup>19</sup> With the exception of Srb, where a satellite access to GSM network had to be installed to compensate for the lack of telephone lines, which reflect the municipality of Gračac's negligence of the needs of this returnee community.

The most visible impact of ZaMirNET's work in the post-war municipalities has been the empowerment and professional development of six local staff in Knin, Lapac, Srb, Kistanje, Drniš, Obrovac who have grown into self-confident social entrepreneurs, driven by the values of inter-ethnic cooperation, community participation and human rights. It is important to note that only one of the local staff, a young woman who returned from Serbia, had professional ICT experience beforehand, three other staff were self-taught, while two women had absolutely no prior exposure to ICT. All six of them were previously unemployed. The group is outstandingly diverse in terms of their ethnicity and war experiences - there are two returnees from Serbia, two Croatian settlers from Bosnia, a Croatian settler from Janjevo, Kosovo and a domicile Croat. Among them, even four - three men and a woman - are war veterans, having fought in three different armies (Croatian army, paramilitary forces of Serbian "Krajina" and paramilitary Bosnian Croat army HVO).

Over the past year and a half, all six of them received sophisticated and intense training in ICT administration, which provides them with a basis for full job retraining and acquisition of professional certificates as computer system administrators. Through their responsibilities of managing all aspects of the computer centers and continuously watching for opportunities to foster community mobilization, they have gained multifaceted leadership, management, facilitation and ICT skills that put them in an advantageous position in the local as well as national labor market. As the local coordinator from Obrovac said: *"I have learned so much over the past year and a half - even if I had not been paid, I would have felt that I have earned so much."*

According to their feedback, working with ZaMirNET has radically expanded their social networks, inspired them to think of new professional goals and view their communities in the new light. For instance, the Obrovac coordinator has attended CESI's women's leadership training program and has decided to start a local campaign on women's human rights. Srb coordinator is confident that he will start his own agricultural business and would at the same time like to continue running the computer center in collaboration with the local civic initiative UNA. Kistanje and Drniš coordinators and regional technical supervisor from Knin are interested in starting a regional web design studio, together with several other web design trainees. Kistanje coordinator, a young Janjevo man, intensely involved in an array of local civil initiatives as well as national youth forums, has already become the key catalyst of cooperation between Janjevo and Serbian youth, as he is planning an international volunteer camp in Kistanje together with two rural youth groups from Serbian villages of Ivoševci and Djeverske. His engagement in the fundraising and public relations of the national umbrella organization of Croatian settlers associations ZUNH is a guarantee that the organization will become even more proactive about partnerships with Serbian returnee organizations.

ZaMirNET has provided these six people, with courage to take up new professional responsibility and invest into their own learning process, an exceptional opportunity to work in an environment that resembles the setting of a Western-style company, where personal initiative, constant learning, focus on clients and teamwork are stimulated and firmly grounded in values of non-discrimination, solidarity and nonviolence. The benefits of ZaMirNET's creation of new employment and social and in the long-run, economic entrepreneurship opportunities for motivated individuals in these five communities indicates the valuable role that business development can play in peacebuilding, especially if conscious attention is paid to the local employees' job enrichment, self-confidence building and their capacity to identify opportunities for social integration facilitated by their professional roles.

All six local ZaMirNET staff have learnt first hand about the difficulties of changing the self-centered attitude of local authorities and passivity of general population. Nevertheless, they are not giving up as continuous identification of opportunities for change has become their daily routine. Their major challenge has been the participatory process of developing municipal web portals. This ambitious task was carried out by a group of interested citizens in each community who had successfully acquired web design skills through the computer centers' intense course for future professionals.

With the help of a ZamirNET's external consultant, they conducted in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in each community, to determine what contents could be put on the web portal and to build relationships with various community actors. The most strenuous part of the process was collecting materials and getting local actors to provide information on their work. Differently from Donji Lapac, where authorities even rewarded a special certificate for contributions to the municipal development, in Obrovac, they encountered strong resistance from the municipal authorities who demanded the presentation of national symbols and objected to the idea of making the municipal budget, the statute and description of different department's mandates public. In Kistanje, the municipal council's discussion of the web portal stirred existent political tensions between the Serbian and Janjevo Croat representatives who eventually agreed to approve it as official municipal website. In several cases local businesspeople did not understand why would detailed web-based descriptions of their business be of benefit to them.

As observed by in the interim report, these kinds of constraints are typical of the challenges associated with promoting and supporting the adoption of social and technological innovations and which, over time, can be overcome, especially now when web portals have been established, making it much easier for formal and informal community leaders to imagine their future potentials for enhancement of their community's social and economic development<sup>20</sup>. Even at present, the web portals provide an inclusive, future-oriented self-representation of the municipalities, as they include information on all public services, NGOs and local civil initiatives that are affiliated with different ethnic groups. ZaMirNET has started search for partners in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, like the electronic journal for Serbian refugees Pravi odgovor<sup>21</sup> that would present the web portals to the potential returnees, that will unavoidable cause future resistances on part of local officials in Croat- dominated municipalities of Obrovac and Drniš (Janjevo Croat local officials in Kistanje are more open to the Serbian return process). The peacebuilding potential of the web portals is primarily contingent on the enthusiasm and commitment of local residents to turn in into a vehicle for community mobilization that would trigger the process of social and economic development, as explained by ZaMirNET's Director Danijela Babić:

*"In addition to economic hardship, people can barely count on legal protection of their rights as the police often do not do their job, as demonstrated by numerous cases where illegal occupants of returnee houses are not evicted. People lack information on the work of local authorities and tend to accept the stagnant state of affairs. All these processes of getting the local authorities to open up are very slow as they require the change of mentality and attitudes, the change of culture where people expect that problems will be resolved by somebody else. The turning point take place when people become critical of the power relations in their community and start fighting for their right to information, legal protection and better living conditions".*

For ZaMirNET, the past two years of community-based facilitation of inter-ethnic and intersectoral partnerships have been a period of intense exploration of new ways of promoting social and economic justice by means of ICT, that are adapted to the present and future development challenges of the Croatian society, especially its most needy post-war areas. ZaMirNET has increasingly become interested in tackling the hardest aspects of community peacebuilding – the challenge of economic revitalization, which is inseparable from enhanced citizens' proactivity, strengthened social networks and increased accountability of local authorities and institutions. ZaMirNET plan to focus more strongly on the promotion of existent economic opportunities such as government subsidized job retraining and business start-up programs, to be combined with

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<sup>20</sup> Community web portals' links: Obrovac <http://www.zamirnet.hr/obrovac/portal/pocetna/naslovnica.htm>, Donji Lapac <http://zamirnet.hr/dlapac/portal>, Drnis <http://www.zamirnet.hr/drnis/proba1/>, Kistanje <http://www.zamirnet.hr/kistanje/portal>

<sup>21</sup> Pravi odgovor website <http://www.praviodgovor.co.yu>

experiments in innovative and alternative economic networks, such as online markets, community barter schemes, self-financed savings and credit cooperatives.

The example of ZaMirNET shows how organizations with long-term commitment to human rights, conflict transformation and social and economic justice can take advantage of the changing funding opportunities and political conditions without compromising its values:

*"We have gained a lot of experience of working in the post-war communities over the past two years, we have revitalized the legacy of the war years when ZaMir's activists would share their email skills women activists and kids in remote villages of Western Slavonia. Our fieldwork today is adapted to new conditions, where we need to develop partnerships with local businesses, government officials and other NGOs. We have discovered our comparative advantages – our flexibility to new conditions, readiness to take risk and set up new programs, our openness to cooperation with other organizations, our ability to combine ICT with people-focused community organizing. We are aware that our work is often frustrating as changes in attitudes take time, but giving up is not an option. For instance, the international volunteer camp in Donji Lapac and Srb stemmed out of the contacts made between local youth and women who attended the computer centers and the Volunteer Center Zagreb. The camp helped restore an amazing natural resort, a promising tourist site in the vicinity of Srb. Hopefully, this time next year, it will turn into a source of income for the returnee community of Srb. We are active in the Association of Progressive Communications again and ready to learn from our worldwide partners on how to take advantage of free software and distance learning solutions that make sense in poor settings. Inside ZaMirNET we have a great mix of activists with environmentalist, peace, human rights and feminist interests and contacts, so we learn from each other constantly. On top of that, we really know how to make creative use of ICT. Our programmers are real experts. No wonder that over the same month, we were bashed in a right-wing US newspaper for acting as a key recruitment node for Balkan anarchists, and praised in the Croatian press for our job search training software. If you dare to do good work, of course there will be echoes of all kinds."*

### **Policy Relevance and Needs for Future Support**

ZaMirNET's innovative use of ICT for the purpose of community development in post-war communities, affected by lack of jobs, investment and fragmented social and economic ties, is particularly relevant for the upcoming local government and self-government reform (including introduction of e-governance) and regional development processes. It would be most beneficial if ZaMirNET started the process of consultations with the two relevant ministries (Ministry of Justice, Public Administration and Local and self-Government and Ministry of Public Works, Reconstruction and Construction), offering its input into the two policies, particularly regarding the importance of facilitating revitalization of social networks and citizens' participation in the local and regional economic development processes. ZaMirNET should also seek partnership in the implementation of the two policies. The intermediary role of EC Delegation to Croatia would probably be most useful in this dialogue. Both reform processes would benefit from collecting information on innovative projects, initiated by local and international NGOs that have promoted inter-sectoral collaboration and social integration in the local communities, so that lesson learned, specific to the local contexts get integrated in the two policies.

ZaMirNET has already considered expanding its jobs search training program to link it with job retraining and self-employment opportunities and seek partnership with the Croatian Bureau of Employment, as well as CARDS Quick Impact Facility Program, managed by UNDP. The idea is to encourage the central government employment agency to integrate online training and mentoring component in its existent field activities, hence enabling greater access to information on employment skills and opportunities in remote communities, where the Bureau does not have full

time staff. In case the Bureau does not show interest, ZaMirNET will seek other partners to set-up a network of employment consultants and ICT hubs in isolated and underdeveloped parts of Croatia.

ZaMirNET's work is a promising example of how Croatian NGOs with a traditional focus on social issues can become more sensitive to the need to stimulate economic development in the post-war areas, which is acutely related to the enhancement of social networking within and outside the communities, as well as the exploration of more effective ways of assessing and presenting the local development opportunities and resources. Involving local residents of different ethnic backgrounds and war histories in the collaborative learning and production activities is a simple and effective way of building trust, mutual respect and interdependence, as shown by the example of ZaMirNET's team of local coordinators from Obrovac, Drniš, Kistanje, Lapac and Srb. However, ZaMirNET's struggle with the tight timeframe of the ECRA Program, with sharp transition to self-financing, just like in the other three case studies from Croatia, indicates that community peacebuilding processes can be effectively supported only if they are considered from the long-term perspective of potential impact, as suggested by Lederach's positioning of community-based conflict transformation in the timeframe of a decade. That does not mean that external actors should remain continuously present on the ground – on the contrary, they should step away gradually as the local actors resume their leadership roles with confidence that their external partners are available when they need additional advice, contacts and advocacy support.