



## 14. peacebuilding in Croatia - the Pakrac project

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On 4 December 1997, Nick Wilson spoke about a joint UN-peace movement project in Croatia. Present were: Christina Arber, Richard Evans, Annie Harrison, Jude Hutchen, Michael Randle, Carol Rank, Andrew Rigby, Kate Witham.

**Presentation** - [Nick Wilson](#) [2]

In his introduction, Nick explained that the Pakrac project was a peacebuilding initiative jointly sponsored by the UN Development Programme, the Croatian Anti-War Campaign (ARK), and the Belgrade based peace group MOST, from June 1993 to January 1997 in the UN Protected enclave of Pakrac. Explaining the historical background to the project, Nick said that Pakrac had been one of the front-line areas in the fighting between Serbs and Croats in the 1991-92 war following the break-up of Yugoslavia and the establishment of an independent Croatian state. Control of the city had changed hands five times during the fighting, and there was widespread destruction of houses and other property.

The UN brokered cease-fire left a divided city with the cease-fire line running through the middle of it. To the north of the line, the city was controlled by the Croatian authorities; to the south, by the Serbs. Prior to the war, the 1990 census showed that approximately 60% of the population of Pakrac were Serb, 30 % Croat, with the remaining 10% comprising people of German, Czech, Italian and other origins. By the summer of 1993 both parts of the divided city were functioning but there was virtually no contact across the divide.

The project had initially been conceived of as a short-term one, lasting only a matter of weeks, in which foreign and 'Yugoslav' volunteers would work with people in the area repairing houses, doing other social and constructive work and attempting to build bridges between the two communities. However, by the end of summer 1993 most of the repair work was taking place in the Croat-controlled area. Around this time it was decided to shift from a short-term, ad-hoc, initiative to a longer-term project. Outside volunteers came mainly from Europe - notably from Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Britain, Poland - plus the US, and Australia. Most were young, the average age being 23-24.

Nick divided the project into five periods.

June 1993 - December 1993, *the formative stage*.

January - June 1994 - *the 'storming' period*.

July - August 1994 - *things fall apart*

Summer 1994 - 1 May 1995 - *the New Order*. On 1 May the Croat army mounted 'Operation Flash', and the Croatian authorities took control of the formerly Serb-held sector of the city. In the atmosphere of Croat triumphalism, most Serbs fled either to (Serb controlled) Eastern Slavonia or Serbia.

May 95 - January 1997 - *Support role to the locals*

The project was formally wound up in January 1997.

*The formative stage*. In this stage the project was finding its feet, establishing contacts and gaining the trust of local people through the rebuilding of houses and other constructive work.

*The storming period*. Constructive and social work continued, but with tensions within the project - chiefly due to the lack of a clear theory or objectives - and between the project and the Croatian authorities and population, especially after volunteers working on the Croat side crossed the cease-fire line to work in the Serb-controlled area. But there were also some positive achievements in this period - in the work with children, in the schools and youth clubs, with the official (Croat) Working Brigades, and in setting up email facilities.



*Things fall apart.* The internal tensions of the project reached a crisis point. (Among the traumatic events was the death in a building accident of one of the Swiss volunteers.)

*New Order.* Attempt to re-structure the project and clarify its goals.

*Working with the locals.* (May 95 onwards). Nick did not have first-hand knowledge of this experience as by then he was working on another project.

Nick concluded the first part of his talk by saying that he had serious reservations about the Pakrac project, and thought the time had come for it to be written up and assessed systematically. Similar kinds of projects were now being established in Bosnia and there was a danger of the mistakes of the Pakrac project being repeated. He went on to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the project under various headings.

### *Volunteers.*

Most were young, motivated at least to some extent by altruism. Some had a religious background - there were, for instance, a considerable number of Catholics. Many came to the project by way of the International Voluntary Service (IVS)/Service Civil Internationale (SCI). But motives were also mixed. Some international volunteers, he felt, wanted to escape problems at home; many of the Poles faced the prospect of being conscripted into the army if they returned to Poland. (It was the Poles especially who stayed with the project to the bitter end.)

Volunteer training was non-existent at the start of the project but developed in the course of it. He had been involved in training as one of the 'co-leaders'. In the later phases of the project, volunteers were encouraged to undergo training in their own country before coming to Pakrac. From 1994 on, about half the volunteers were Yugoslavs, half from outside countries.

Another difficulty was that many of the volunteers, both Yugoslav and Foreign, had previously worked in refugee camps and their experience wasn't necessarily appropriate in the Pakrac situation.

### *Ideology and Theory*

Nick distinguished between ideology, which he defined as concerned with why one should take action, and theory, which concerned what action to take. Regarding ideology, the project proclaimed itself as having a non-partisan and nonviolent approach and as working for reconciliation between the two sides. It was supposedly non-hierarchical, though in fact there was an unacknowledged hierarchy. The Core Group was committed to the principle of nonpartisanship.

Regarding theory, no-one at the start had a clue about mediation or conciliation, or knew of similar projects that had been attempted elsewhere. (To the best of his knowledge, the only comparable project had been one in Cyprus during the 1970s following the division of the island).<sup>1</sup> The project received a lot of publicity with journalists constantly in attendance especially in the 1993-94 period. Academics, too, came on visits to study the project and then returned home to write up their theses. As a result there developed an anti-journalist, anti-academic, feeling amongst the volunteers.

The 'voluntary ethic' was strong amongst the volunteers, but he did not think this was appropriate in this kind of project. It sometimes resulted in short-term volunteers - people who had only been there for two or three weeks - having an undue influence on decisions. Some volunteers were evidently trying to 'find themselves'. He concurred with Annie who intervened to say that in a project like this, personal development should be seen as an 'extra' and could not be a central focus of the work.

### *Power structure of the project*

The non-hierarchical mode of organisation concealed hidden power, with a Pakrac 'family' operating in a somewhat mafia fashion. Problems arose about who controlled the money, who signed cheques and so forth. Another problem that emerged was that the United Nations Office in Vienna did not have proper clearance from the UN to proceed with the project - and in fact they were only involved in it in the early stages. From 1994 onwards, ARK in Zagreb and MOST in Belgrade co-ordinated the project.

### *Psychological issues in relation to volunteers*

The project organisers lost all contact with most of the short-term volunteers when they finished their stint, simply because of the pressure of the work. They had to train new people, and deal with day-to-day situations and crises. It could be suggested that the project took all the stress and secondary trauma of Pakrac, put it in the heads of



impressionable young volunteers and then sent them all home with no support whatsoever. He was sure many of them would have had severe problems reintegrating into their home situations.

As regards the long-term volunteers, many of these got into a standard pattern of behaviour in which they would go home, last about three weeks there and return. Then after perhaps another six months they would go home a second time when they were even more burnt out. They would still not be able to cope at home, feeling everything was trivial, and return again to Pakrac. Many of them were young people, often unemployed, with very little money and some with no fixed abode. So they became trapped. It was easier for them to be with the 'family' in Pakrac rather than to be at home where people were wary of them and half-expected them to become unhinged and act in irrational, violent ways or, alternatively, expected them to slot in straight away and not have any reactions.

Another problem was that in Pakrac everyone - locals and foreigners - was drinking heavily - mainly because there was just nothing to do in the evenings. One optimistic study of the project had suggested that Pakrac was a kind of microcosm of what the town might have been had it not been for the war. Personally he did not buy that because the ambience was overwhelmingly heterosexual, there was only one black volunteer, and many of the volunteers had drinking problems. It was not a model of society he would be happy with. The co-leader of the project in its final phase was a psychologist who wanted to do a psychological survey of the motivation and fall-out of the volunteers.

### *Who needed whom?*

Who needed whom was one of the major questions about the project. Were the organisations and volunteers responding to the needs of the situation or fulfilling needs of their own?

In 1992-93, the UN was looking for some alternative way to build peace, not only in Croatia but elsewhere. They had peacekeepers on the ground but they had no ideas for promoting positive peace. In 1992 Boutros-Boutros Galli enunciated his 'Agenda for Peace' in which he mentioned civilian peace building. It was a current concern within the UN and people there were looking for some way of implementing the idea. So the UN definitely needed the project. But the UN is a huge and rather chaotic machine and it was not necessarily clear to them that this Pakrac project was one they could study. And it seemed now that there was some problem with getting authority to cooperate with the Anti War Campaign on the project.

The international peace movement also needed the project. At the time it was happening, Bosnia was in flames and there was no possibility of civilian peacebuilding there. Pakrac became a kind of flagship for a lot of organisations. Funding for the project was provided on a sporadic and ad-hoc basis mainly from Germanic countries and from organisations with an interest in civilian peacebuilding and nowhere else to put their money. They invested heavily, both financially and emotionally in it. He felt they definitely needed the project more than the townspeople. There was a lot of 'guilt giving'. Croatia was awash with beds which rusted in piles by the side of the road, and unsuitable clothing. Once when he went to the swimming baths in the nearby town of Lipic he found it full of dumped clothing supplied by humanitarian aid organisations.

There was also the issue of putting local people in danger by one's actions. For instance aid deliveries to Mostar used to put local people in danger while they were unloading the trucks - and then they would find out that it was out-of-date medicine.

Generally he felt that the more religiously motivated volunteers and organisations really needed the project as a kind of testing ground for their particular theory or approach. The Mennonites were heavily involved in the Lipic project which he was highly critical of because the town was not divided like Pakrac and the assistance was going entirely to the Croats. The desire of the Mennonites to be involved in the region was so strong that they had no qualms about this. Urban middle-class Yugoslav activists also needed something going on 'in the sticks' rather than in Zagreb, Belgrade or Sarajevo. Finally a lot of the volunteers needed to 'get a life' - and they got it there. One outcome of the project was that many of the core long-term volunteers were now doing related full-time work - with Oxfam, OSCE, the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution, the Centre for Peace Studies in Zagreb and so forth. In answer to a question he said he felt that this development was a positive one, and added that when he questioned Balkan Peace Team volunteers about their motivation he became suspicious if they gave only altruistic motives.

### *Assessing the outcome*

The project had many successes but because it had no clear formalised objectives, apart from the vague one of reconciliation between the two sides, it was difficult to list objectives and tick them off. Generally he thought the project was successful in its outputs. On the physical side, a lot of houses were rebuilt. This was important because unless you did something about the infrastructure reconciliation could only go so far.



The social impact was harder to quantify. However, there were tangible benefits, particularly for the young people. They were exposed to a point of view which came from outside the town and outside the state-controlled media; they experienced a discourse with people who had completely different viewpoints to them and who consistently held to the view that people on the other side of the line were not necessarily monsters. This was the only situation where they were receiving that view. Women's groups on both sides of the divide took off in quite a big way and ultimately became registered NGOs. The Youth Club too became a registered NGO and continued to exist despite the ending to the volunteer project. The email project in the town was successful, and the whole of West Slavonia was now wired for email and run by teenagers from the secondary school.

Another positive outcome was the unofficial shuttle diplomacy. Once volunteers began to cross the line, and it became known that they would be coming back, people would daily take volunteers aside and give them packages or messages to deliver, or ask them for news or for them to take a photograph of their former home or find out who was living there, or see if they could get documents they had left on the kitchen table, and so forth.

Jude Hutchen asked if there was a negative side to this in that it created kind of hierarchy in which outsiders could cross the line but local people could not. Nick said this did become a problem, and that at one period displaced Croats from the Serb part of the town picketed the ceasefire line and would not allow anyone to cross because they were not permitted to do so. They were stopping all foreigners crossing the line, soldiers as well as volunteers. While this was going on a group from Switzerland Without an Army 'invaded' the town. He was highly critical of their behaviour. In his view their reason for existing in Switzerland had been sidelined and they were now looking for a project abroad to justify themselves. This was the very worst example of outsiders needing the town more than the town needed the outsiders. To circumvent the picket line, they travelled south to Lipic, crossed the line there and showed up in great numbers on the Serb side of Pakrac. This was astonishing insensitivity after they had had only a couple of days experience living in the town. The project had been operating in the town for a year and a half at that stage and the organisers advised repeatedly against this action. The decision of the Swiss group to push ahead despite this, and despite the local conditions, led directly to the death of one of their volunteers and to another having a mental breakdown. Indirectly, it also led to the suicide of a third member of their group.

Nick added that a few Croats were issued with UN passports to enable them to cross the line, including two initiators of the project from ARK, Vanya Nikolić and Goran Bozicević. This was positive in so far as it demonstrated that it was possible for a Croat to cross into the Serb area and come back alive. The problem was that because the volunteers had begun work on the Croatian side local people had in a sense adopted them, and regarded them as 'their volunteers'. They felt betrayed when they then crossed over to the other side - to the very people who had turned their guns on them in 1991. The volunteers came back, but the fact that they had gone there was enough, and there was a difficult week or two after the line was crossed for the first time. There were even death threats against the local people working on the project, and the Croatian authorities came close to ending it there and then. However, they managed to ride out the crisis and it eventually became accepted that the volunteers would cross the line. One positive outcome of the crisis was that the people co-ordinating the project had to spell out the fact that it was not designed simply to help the Croatian side but was aimed at bringing about reconciliation. Of course that fact could have been made clear from the beginning - but in that case the project would never have been allowed to take place at all.

Annie commented that the fact that the volunteers had crossed the line and come back meant there was the potential to create a different pattern in people's minds. But it would take a lot of time, effort and discussion to achieve that kind of breakthrough. Nick commented that at that period all volunteers were working every day on government sponsored Working Brigades with local people, many of them poor women doing menial jobs who had been virtually conscripted. At first on the Monday mornings after volunteers had crossed the line, things would be extremely tense, but then the volunteers would be working alongside local people in the Brigades for the rest of the week and little by little the pattern came to be more accepted. People came to see that the action of the volunteers in crossing the line wasn't the betrayal they had first supposed it to be.

Another positive outcome was that when it became possible in 1995 to begin work in Bosnia, some of the people on the project who had always favoured defining the objectives more strongly and having short-term volunteers do longer stints went off and began a project in Gornji Vakuf, a town divided between Croats and Muslims. There they had a following wind because the area was within the Croat-Muslim Federation where at least in theory there was support for reconciliation from the authorities on both sides. As a result of the lessons learnt from the Pakrac project the people involved did amazing things which the UN would now like to replicate throughout Bosnia. Philip Pierce ran that project in a hierarchical style with no short-term volunteers and with heavy funding and clear



objectives. He was now working for the UN Development Programme in Sarajevo. By the Spring of this year he had raised five million pounds for a Canton-wide peacebuilding project, using the Gorni Vakuuf model, in Travnik in Central Bosnia.

### ***NARP Discussion***

#### *Failure of Reconciliation*

Carol asked if Nick was saying that the project had no success in achieving its basic aim of reconciliation. All the accomplishments he had listed had occurred on the Croatian side - and when people actually did cross over to the Serb side they were distrusted. Nick replied that volunteers from the Belgrade-based peace group Most were working along similar lines on the Serb side. However, after the intervention of the Croatian army on 1 May 1995 nearly all the Serbs left or were kicked out of the town. Reconciliation wasn't an issue after that point. Prior to that people on each side were expecting the other to launch an offensive and thus the political atmosphere was against reconciliation. If asked by the international community, the authorities would say they were in favour of reconciliation, but at the same time they were arming themselves for a military victory.

#### *Premature intervention?*

Jude asked if the volunteers had gone in too early. Was it a situation where it really was not possible for that kind of project to be effective at that stage? Nick said that if they had had then the kind of knowledge and experience they now possessed and had sat down at the outset to consider the project, they would probably have realised that it would not succeed. It was a moot point, however, whether the Croatian victory in Pakrac nullified the whole project.

#### *Parallels with the experience of peace camps*

Annie said that from Nick's description it appeared that the main thing to be learnt was that in a panic situation people make uneducated choices. But she was not convinced that it needed the Pakrac project to learn the kind of lessons that Nick and others were pointing to. People could have foreseen that the project was unlikely to succeed, but they wanted something to be done, and so went ahead. Kate added that all the negative aspects sounded very similar to those she had experienced on peace camps - the same difficulties over hierarchy, ideology, sorting things out, working together. People who had been through such experiences should be prepared to give advice when less experienced people were setting up projects of this kind.

### **Note:**

1. The Cyprus Resettlement Project, 1973-1974, a project to resettle Turkish people in four villages from which they had fled during fighting between Greeks and Turks in 1963. The project involved international volunteers and local people and was approved by both Greek and Turkish authorities on the island. It came to a halt with the Turkish invasion of the island in 1974. See A. Paul Hare and Ellen Wilkinson, 'Cyprus - Conflict and its Resolution' in A. Paul Hare & Herbert H Blumberg (eds), *Liberation without Violence: A Third Party Approach*, Rowman & Littlefield, Totowa, New Jersey, 1977. See also A. Paul Hare. 'Cyprus Resettlement Project: An Instance of International Peacemaking' in Yeshua Moser-Puangsuwan and Thomas Weber (eds), *Nonviolent Intervention Across Borders: A Recurrent Vision*, Spark M. Matsunaga Institute for Peace, University of Hawai'i, Honolulu, 2000

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