

**PART 2:**  
**CASE STUDIES**

## **Interethnic Relations in Eastern Slavonia – A Balance Ten Years after the Erdut Agreement**

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*The psychiatrists' point of view*

This text was written on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the war in the Eastern Slavonia and more than ten years since the Erdut Agreement was signed.

Since I'm a psychiatrist I won't speak only about historical and political facts but also about the *reconstruction* of the interpersonal relations and interethnic relations in Eastern Slavonia, or more precisely, in Vukovar.

Eastern Slavonia is situated in Eastern Croatia, between the Croatian border with Hungary, to the North, Serbia and Montenegro to the East and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the South. The area is divided into two Croatian administrative counties; Vukovar-Sirmium and Osijek-Baranja.

The demographic picture of the area has changed in all aspects in last ten years – the total number of inhabitants has decreased as well as the ratio of some minorities.

Vukovar-Sirmium County is the smallest and it has a population of 204,768 while in Osijek-Baranja County live 330,506 inhabitants.

The actual national composition in Vukovar-Sirmium County is 83,44% Croats, 15,45% Serbs, 0,87% Ukrainians, 0,65% Slovaks, 0,99% Hungarians and 1,11% other. In the Osijek-Baranja County the national composition is: 83,89% Croats, 8,73% Serbs, 2,96% Hungarians, 2,64% other nationalities and 1,78% who didn't reveal their ethnicity (mostly these persons were "Yugoslavs").

In particular, the number of Serbs significantly decreased in 2001, because a lot of the Serbs left the area after the return of internally displaced Croats during peacetime reintegration.<sup>16</sup> Also, after the Erdut agreement, a lot of Serbs decided to leave the area and move to Serbia and Montenegro and elsewhere.

Some of them decided to go because they were active participants in the war on the Serb side, but some decided to go because of the animosity toward the Serbian minority population, created within Croatia, despite the fact that in the core of the Erdut agreement provisions were made for the protection of human rights of people who lived in the area as well as those who were forced to leave the area during the war. To be more precise, the Erdut agreement allowed the return of all refugees and displaced persons to their homes (Croats, Hungarians and others) but at the same time those people, who came in Eastern Slavonia from other parts of Croatia had the right to stay in the area (mostly Serbs from Western Slavonia and Dalmatia).

This means that in the period of the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia we had many interest groups, not only divided by their nationality, since, for example, within the Serbian community we had those people who were originally from Eastern Slavonia and those who came during the war from other parts of Croatia. Also, among some national minorities, we had those Ukrainians who left the area with the Croats and those who stayed with Serbs who were confronted to each other after their return.

Related to these events, for the first time since the occupation of the area by Serbian forces, Croatian laws for the protection, preservation and promotion of the identity of minority groups were expected to be applied in this area. These relate to the rights of minorities to use their own language and alphabet, and the freedom to express their nationality and cultural autonomy.

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<sup>16</sup> In 1998 Eastern Slavonia was fully reintegrated in the Croatian state (note of the editors).

At the same time, both sides mistrusted each other and they were very reserved. The war experience was still very vivid; many inhabitants had lost their families so it was very difficult to start to communicate. These first years were very complicated and hard to overcome.

After the Erdut agreement, the intervention of the international community, through the work of many international agencies that worked in the area helped greatly; programs and projects were initiated with the aim of helping the reconciliation process.

Then, Croat and Serbs lived in the same area, but almost without any communication. The only contacts were personal ones, but even those were very secret, even the contacts within the same family.

Most of the services such as health, educational, police and other governmental services were reintegrated in the Croatian system. So, the first representatives of these services had to come in the Croatian Danube Region and start to work together with their colleagues from the Serb side. The international community decided to start reconciliation within these groups, so the beneficiaries of the first reconciliation programs were policemen, doctors, teachers and people employed in different county and governmental institutions in the area.

Programs and projects were implemented by different governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), all supported by the international community. The most important initiatives were psychosocial programs, which ensured psychological support to more open interaction between ethnic groups and sharing of different war experiences and the whole range of different feelings caused by the so-called “other side”.

At the beginning most of the NGOs had ethnical connotations. For several years we had so-called “Croatian” NGOs and “Serbian” NGOs. The first non-governmental organization without that connotation was the Vukovar Institute for Peace, Research and Education, funded by Croats, Serbs and other minorities living in the area.

After years of work the situation has changed, little by little. Communication has been restarted, as it was anticipated, first among neighbors and working colleagues and then among other groups. After a time they all realized that their experience were mostly common; most of them were war victims – in different ways, maybe – but all inhabitants of the area suffered from war, and most of them have longer or shorter experience of being refugees. At the end, all of them share the experience of living in an almost absolutely destroyed town, like Vukovar.

Middle-aged and elderly people who had the experience of living in common were the first to reopen communication, while young people who didn't experience this, who heard the worst things about "the other side" and who grew up in other areas of Croatia or abroad, had a lot of problems getting used to live in the area and to live with each other.

The situation is further complicated by separated school systems. In Vukovar, the Serbian community, a minority that represents a relatively large portion of the population, is entitled to separate educational institutions and school departments<sup>17</sup>. Classes at these minority schools are held in the Serbian language. The teachers of the same national affiliation are carrying out instruction, following the general school curriculum that has been approved by the Ministry of Education. In addition, the Serb minority is entitled to develop additional school curricula that adequately present their history, culture and literature. Not surprisingly, considering the fierceness of the fighting that took place in this area, the most sensitive issue is the development of a history curriculum that would objectively and honestly portray the recent war events. With an appreciation for the heightened tensions that existed in these communities in 1997/98, as populations came and others went, a compromise solution was put in place, which called for a five-year moratorium<sup>18</sup> on history teaching in Serbian schools with respect to the

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<sup>17</sup> Article 11 of the Croatian Constitutional Law on Human Rights and the Freedoms and Rights of National and Ethnic Communities and Minorities as amended on December 19, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Annex to the Erdut Agreement, Nov. 1995

events that occurred in former Yugoslavia during the years 1989 to 1997. This temporary solution, however, expired a few years ago, leaving uncertainty as to the content of the new history curriculum.

This was the reason why the Vukovar Institute for Peace, Research and Education, supported by the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) and Catholic Relief Service initiated research with the aim of understanding attitudes of pupils, parents and teachers of history curriculum in higher classes on elementary school and gymnasium, with special retrospection on, according to different criteria, differences in attitudes between pupils, parents and teachers.

The research had started with the hypothesis according to which pupils, their parents and teachers will have different attitudes related to the questions of history. Another assumption was that pupils among themselves, as well as parents and teachers among themselves, would have different attitudes about history-related questions, depending on their national belonging.

The results confirmed the hypotheses at several levels. In other words, groups of pupils, parents and teachers have given different answers to the same questions, while answers of the groups of parents and teachers were more similar and quite different from the answers of the group of pupils.

Parents and teachers, meaning the groups that had experienced good relations between majority and minority groups, recognized the need of studying the history of good relations, and teaching the subjects, which can improve these relations while pupils who were mostly born and grew during and after the war, do not see the need for studying history of good relations.

Equally, the need to know the history of national minorities has been mostly recognized by the parents, and teachers in the same percentage, but the number of pupils who think that knowing history of national minorities is important, is half smaller.

This has confirmed the postulate according to which two different age groups – pupils who belong to the younger generation have different experiences from their parents and teachers who, evidently, belong to the older generation.

Differences in attitudes regarding national belonging are the clearest in statements related to the history of national minorities, and lectures of themes connected with the war. Croatian nationals do not express the need to be familiar with the history of minorities, while pupils and teachers of Serbian and other nationalities equally recognize a need to study history of national minorities.

Croats, unlike Serbs and members of other national minorities, harbor the following attitudes:

- Good knowledge of history of one's own nation is very important for contemporary Man,
- good knowledge of history of bad relationship and conflicts between majority population and national minorities is very important for every contemporary Man and
- there are historical themes that should not be discussed in schools because they can contribute to worsening of relations between majority population and national minorities.

It is important to draw lessons from history, and so Serbs are different from Croats and other members of national minorities, in harboring the following attitudes:

- There are historical themes that should be receiving special attention because they contribute to the improvement of relations between majority and minority populations,
- it is good that some themes from our recent history not be taught in history classes immediately after the war and
- pupils should be spared difficult historical themes, particularly those that could traumatize them.

Members of other national minorities, unlike Croats and Serbs, harbor the following attitudes:

- Good knowledge of history in general is very important for every contemporary Man,
- good knowledge of history of national minorities is very important for every contemporary Man and
- good knowledge of history of good relationship between majority and minority populations is very important for every contemporary Man.

All listed results and presented analyses and opinions state a need for action, which would, in this case, consider concrete contribution to the process of rapprochement of members of different nationalities, and their additional education in history classes and methodology, with the additional goal of bringing together pupils and parents of different nationality.

This survey was administered during the school year 2004/05 and the results are better than those that other group of researchers got two years earlier. In that research, done by researchers from the University of Zagreb, pupils underlined their wish to have separate schools and their opinion that “the other side” is not a part of their lives. Most of them stated that they don’t want to communicate with “them”, they don’t want to know anything about their experiences and emotions and so on. In the same research parents and teachers were much more willing to cooperate than pupils.

Nowadays, the situation has improved a lot; schools are still separated, but disco clubs are not anymore, so young people have started to communicate. Many young people communicate in school and sports activities, but also leisure time and voluntary work in non-governmental organizations.

The general change in the political climate and the start of the process of integration of Croatia in the EU has had a big impact in the everyday life of Eastern Slavonia. Most people from both sides communicate normally; lots of activities are common and not ethnically separated anymore. The biggest obstacles to better interethnic tolerance in Eastern

Slavonia are the lack of perspective for young people in the area and a high rate of unemployment.

It has to be said that the Croatian government supports economic development of the area and results have been visible in the last few years. New opportunities for employment and opening of the several faculties in Vukovar gave huge support to the improvement of the interethnic tolerance in the area. Also, financial support of the government for activities of non-governmental organizations is much higher now, so our work is continuing and more professional.

Speaking about the future, the most important thing is the change in the educational system. While legislation gives the opportunity for national minorities to be educated in their own language, we must find better ways of implementing this, and arrange educational institutions and processes, so as not to separate pupils by ethnical differences.

In that sense, Eastern Slavonia still needs strong support from the EU, not only financially but also in an advisory role. The current CARDS program is an example of good practice because it stimulates the cooperation of governmental and non-governmental organizations through different programs, which are complementary to existing governmental programs.

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