



# War veterans

in constructive process of dealing with the past

Ivana Franović



Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA)  
nenasilje.org/en  
© CNA 2015

## War veterans in constructive process of dealing with the past<sup>1</sup>

*Ivana Franović*

Since 2002, the Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA) has worked with war veterans from different armies who fought against each other during the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. CNA was established in 1997 in Sarajevo as a peace organisation engaging peace and human rights activists from different parts of the region of former Yugoslavia and doing cross-border work. Four years later, we established a second office in Belgrade.

This piece is a reflection on CNA's experiences from our work with former combatants on dealing with the past and peacebuilding activities. It is an overview of how we came to the idea to work with this very specific and very often hard-line ethnonationalist group, how this process developed and what are some of the activities undertaken within this cooperation. It is also an overview of the difficulties we cope with that come with this type of work and our sources of motivation to keep on doing it. I am grateful to my colleagues Nedžad Horozović, Adnan Hasanbegović, Nenad Vukosavljević and Amer Delić, who in our internal work distribution are in charge of working with war veterans, on the time they set aside to give me individual interviews for the purposes of this piece.<sup>2</sup> I thank the entire team for always being there when they were needed.

### **Why war veterans?**

At the very start of our peace work we in CNA had realised that we as a region were not going

---

1 I am grateful that a number of activists and peace and memory workers from outside this region whose opinion I respect could contribute to this text by very useful feedback. Anja Petz, Dr Anna Kaminsky, Celia McKeon, Dr Chandre Gould, Martina Fischer, Natascha Zupan and Verne Harris, thank you!

2 They were asked to select situations in their work with former combatants that were important for them: when they were reassured that what they do is in fact work on reconciliation, when they found it all very hard, when they had great dilemmas, when their motivation to continue with this work rose and if they had a proper laugh doing this work.

to get very far, i.e. no true societal change could be achieved, unless we profoundly commit ourselves to dealing with the war, its causes and consequences. Without constructively dealing with the past, peacebuilding, but also the development of a democratic society, would not lead to desired effects, because it is this very past that often trips you up on your way.

The project of war was tremendously successful in establishing divisions along ethnic lines, and the more time passes the more divided we in the region become. Some of us may refuse to be categorised into ethnic groups, but no one's asking us, we have already been categorised. New generations are coming of age with no experience of living together, generations that find it completely normal not to have much contact with the 'others'. Those that are 'not to be trusted'.

And yet, overcoming fear, establishing communication and building fundamental trust are truly the first steps in peacebuilding. Trust of which only some vague traces remain. How can someone who is a Bosniak trust someone who is a Serb from Prijedor and who claims not to know of Omarska, Keraterm and Trnopolje<sup>3</sup> and everything that happened there? How can someone who is a Serb from Knin trust someone who is a Croat and who claims that no Serbs were expelled from their homes and that they decided to leave on their own? How to trust someone who calls the devastation of Vukovar liberation of the city? How can someone who lost their loved ones in the horrible carnage trust someone who denies this carnage ever took place, or constantly relativises it by minimising the number of casualties or justifies it by the fact that 'they did so and so to us...'? How can we trust those who glorify war criminals and call them heroes? How can we trust those who, without knowing us or anything about us except of the assumption that we belong to a certain ethnic group, accuse: you have been slaying us! Dominant narratives on all sides claim: we were defending ourselves, the war was imposed upon us and we are the greatest victims in this war. It is quite clear that no stable and lasting peace is possible in this context unless we stir and shake the dominant understandings of wartime past and create space for multiple perspectives, i.e. inclusive instead of exclusive interpretations. If we do not deal with what has been done in our name and what we ourselves failed to prevent.

We at the Centre for Nonviolent Action have come to the realisation that we have to deal with our Balkans hardship and suffering and create spaces that can lead us to healing: to connect people across borders and build trust; to create space for recognising and acknowledging the suffering of the afflicted; to condemn hatred, violence and crime, starting with those committed in the name of the community we belong to or the one we are categorised in on account of our background; to point out the narratives that promote or justify violence and hatred and to create spaces for multiple perspective interpretations of our past. To return to the 'enemy' a human face.

Ever since we started our work, we encountered war veterans at our peace trainings. This was hardly surprising given that hundreds of thousands of people had taken part in the wars. Twelve years ago, we decided to dedicate part of our resources solely to working with war veterans. And primarily because we have come to see that they, when they choose to and when they make a commitment to it, deconstruct the enemy images we are buried in much more easily and thoroughly than anyone else.

---

3 Infamous detention camps in the surroundings of the small town of Prijedor where people were forcibly interned and tortured.





## War veterans telling their stories in public forums

The first activity we developed were public forums entitled “Four Views” in which former combatants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro came together to speak about why they went to war, what motivated them, and how they see all that now. There were times when we had speakers that had participated at the very same front at the same time on different sides. In 2002 and over the two following years, these public forums were held in Serbia (Indjija, Nis, Kragujevac, Novi Pazar, Zenica, Banja Luka, Kraljevo, Novi Sad and Vlasotince), Montenegro (Bijelo Polje and Podgorica) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Gornji Vakuf – Uskoplje, Nevesinje and Sarajevo).<sup>4</sup> Auditoriums were often packed with locals population, young and old, and it was not rare to have other war veterans from the same town among the audience, but also refugees. It was often difficult to complete the public forum because people in the audience had a great number of questions, or they simply wanted to share their experiences with the public forum participants. So, when the public forums would finally be over, people would come up to greet the guests, war veterans from another state, ‘enemies’, to shake their hands and thank them. Public forum visitors, the local population, mostly expressed great support for the idea, which at times seemed unreal to us.

One of the speakers at the public forum in Kraljevo was our colleague Adnan. An elderly man was sitting in the audience, constantly looking at him, his eyes brimming with tears. After the public forum, he came up to Adnan to shake his hand. “He touched my heart with this kind of sorrow he was carrying with him, and I could clearly feel in him all the pain of these relations between us, the wars,” says Adnan.

However, there were often those who came poised to chide ‘enemies and domestic traitors’, so they would be fidgeting uncomfortably at the start, gnarling and throwing in snide remarks, awaiting evidence for the judgement they had made in advance, and then, listening to the speakers, would get puzzled and give up the gnarling and the remarks. Thus an elderly man in Novi Sad, presumably expecting that the public forum would ‘accuse Serbian people, as usual’, after the initial gnarling and snide remarks, followed by intent listening, stood up, completely baffled, saying: “I don’t get it now, who are you all against?” It is interesting that whenever anyone would shout something unpleasant to the public forum participants, or when a small group would try to distract participants by making or answering phone calls and talking loudly, people from the audience would react and offer support for the guests. As if they felt the need to make these ‘foreign’ guests feel well and safe in their town.

In Kragujevac, a group of men, most probably local war veterans, tried to prevent the forum from taking place by blocking the entrance. After a talk with the police they realised they wouldn’t be able to prevent the public forum as it was duly reported and the police was securing it. Then they decided to be in the audience and observe. And then, in the second part of the public forum, they got actively involved and started asking questions as all other visitors did. Such situations were our best indicator

---

4 Another, fifteenth, public forum was held in Vienna in 2005, at the invitation of our friends. Along with people from the former Yugoslavia who now live or work in Austria, a great number of Austrians with no Balkan descent were among the audience. More information on the “Four Views” public forums can be found in publications published as special additions to dailies or weeklies: <http://nenasilje.org/en/2004/four-views> (English translation also available) and our regular annual reports. See also: the evaluation Wils, Oliver (2004). *War Veterans and Peacebuilding in Former Yugoslavia. A Pilot Project of the Centre for Non-violent Action (CNA)*. Berghof Occasional Paper No. 24. Berlin: Berghof Research Centre. Also, see Martina (ed.). (2006). *Peacebuilding and Civil Society in Bosnia-Herzegovina – Ten Years after Dayton*. Münster, London: Lit-Verlag.

that the public forums were fulfilling their purpose: deconstructing enemy images and opening room for dialogue. And this was possible thanks to the courage of individual war veterans who dared to sit in front of an audience and tell their stories.

When we were wondering about the way in which we would like to involve war veterans, and came up with the concept of public forums, our hardest task was to find people courageous enough to speak out. We hadn't been aware back then that it mainly took more courage for them to return to their communities after the public forums than to take part in them.

When the public forums were well underway, we introduced the training-seminar for war veterans. We needed it in order for the combatants to get to know each other better, to gain a better sense of their varying narratives, build mutual trust and thus become a source of support for each other and to empower them for public speaking. Bit by bit, these trainings became an event in their own right, not necessarily related to the public forums. After fifteen public forums, we decided we organised quite enough of them and that it was time to make a step further in the work with ex-combatants and dealing with the past. Giving a human face to enemy is of crucial importance in peacebuilding, but it is not sufficient. It was necessary to thoroughly dismantle the matrices that lead us into war and fed us with hatred, and public forums were not the most fitting format for this task. The basis for such a task is a personal process: facing up to one's own past and responsibilities, looking deeply at yourself in the mirror. And this process needs a bit more of a safe space, it cannot start in front of an audience and cameras. Training was a useful format, and we continued the trainings for veterans because these encounters were clearly of great value. We did not know which direction we would go in. We certainly had wishes and dreams, but we were not sure what was possible to do. Thus we decided to listen closely and expand the circles of war veterans motivated to work on peacebuilding.<sup>5</sup>

We expected that the initiated cross-border collaboration of former enemies would gain its own momentum and live beyond us and our guidance, but this dream hasn't come true. Preparing and organising such complex and sensitive activities did, after all, require a lot of what combatants themselves lacked, and support from combatants' organisation was very shy. Truth be told, these haven't had the necessary capacities to start with.

### **Paying respect to the victims on all sides**

Fairly early on when we started to cooperate with war veterans the idea of joint visits to sites of suffering emerged. We were daydreaming of how powerful it would be if the veterans went to Potocari<sup>6</sup> together to pay their respects to the victims, or to Ovcar<sup>7</sup>, Lora<sup>8</sup>... what an impact that would have in this atmosphere of only pointing out ones' own victims and denying and failing to acknowledge

---

5 More information about the methodology of these trainings is available in our handbook Franović, I., Vukosavljević, N. & Šmidling, T. (2014). *Reconciliation?! Training Handbook for Dealing with the Past*. Belgrade, Sarajevo: Centre for Nonviolent Action.

6 Srebrenica-Potocari Memorial and Cemetery for the Victims of the 1995 Genocide, located in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina.

7 The site of a massacre near the city of Vukovar, Croatia.

8 Former prison camp in Split, Croatia, which operated from 1992 to 1997, where people were tortured.

the suffering of others, failing to acknowledge that 'our people' had committed crimes. If war veterans, who are among the leading guardians of these narratives in society, were to go and pay their respects to victims who suffered at the hands of 'their' fellow combatants, this matrix would be seriously shaken. It sounds simple enough, but we had been wondering where to find people who were prepared to go through with this and potentially expose themselves to attacks from all sides: from 'their own' side because they turned to be 'traitors' and from 'the other' side because they dared to come to the sacred place of victimhood. We'd only known a few of them, and that wasn't enough.

And then, several years later, through persistent work in trainings for war veterans, a group of combatants emerged who were very keen on this idea. So in 2008 the first visits to sites of memory commenced. At first, these activities were done inconspicuously, with no involvement of the media and not raising too much dust. Along with the fact that we believe serious work on reconciliation does not take place in front of the cameras, we had the feeling that the media would do more harm than good at the beginning of these delicate processes.

There was an agreement within the group of war veterans that the selection of places they would visit would be left up to the hosts. Local associations of war veterans would act as hosts. They organised visits to important sites in their areas, and we organised the arrival of veterans from other regions and facilitated talks after the visits. Former combatants were eager to take their guests to the sites of suffering and memorials to their fellow countrypeople or fellow combatants, introduce them to the specificities of wartime occurrences in their context and clarify how the people suffered. At first, critically viewing the role of 'one's own' side in the war was more difficult, but as time passed space for self-criticism started to open too. Every time, the hosts' concern for their guests was clear, concern for their feeling well and safe, for them not being the target of a wrong look or a snide remark in passing... It wasn't easy to be in the role of the host. However, being in the role of a guest was not easy either, especially when visiting a site where 'your people' killed 'their people' or committed a war crime against civilians, it was difficult to face different interpretations of wartime past and question one's own truths.

After the visits, talks were always organised with the participation of war veterans, both guests and hosts, together with CNA activists. They were held in an enclosed and safe space, in order for everyone to have the chance to exchange views on how it was for them, what was hard and whether they have had a problem with anything. These talks were of essential importance, because people had the opportunity to talk about what bothered them about the opposing narratives and to gain more and more understanding for each other. Even though they found it was emotionally quite demanding to visit the sites, they felt it to be necessary. With every following visit this group was growing stronger, as trust among them deepened as well. And the group was slowly expanding as new people were joining.

After the first couple of visits, when they were empowered enough and saw that they could handle the concept both as individuals and a group, the veterans accepted the idea of media representatives joining the visits too. Also, we have done our best to take the opportunity to meet local authorities in the place we were visiting in order to inform them of what was going on, but also to attain official support for our activities. The activities did get media coverage.

The following step that the veterans took (which I consider to be a proper minor revolution in the work on dealing with the past and peacebuilding) was to take their guests to usually unmarked sites<sup>9</sup>

---

9 Following the principle of denial of war crimes committed by 'our' people, many sites of crimes and atrocities







of suffering of current ethnic minorities. Or, more clearly: sites where members of their ethnic group or their army had committed crimes. It is a part of history very well known by 'the others', but largely denied in their own communities. Such a move has great weight, much more so than had it been made by a group of peace or human rights activists. The significance lies in the fact that it is members of the very group that reproduces dominant uniform narratives of war where they also play the main roles who are now the ones creating space for other narratives and other interpretations, giving up the meta-narratives of 'us' being merely victims and recognising that crimes have been committed in their name. In addition, they are in a position to tell this story, even though it is one of taboos in their community. The conscience and honesty they manifest in this way are the strongest foundation for trust between former combatants from different sides.

Naturally, as well as the previous step, this one had not taken place randomly or accidentally, but was instead carefully planned and prepared. The potential for it was developed through the trainings for war veterans, and then through negotiations with veterans' associations, until the group was empowered enough to carry out this type of activity. But then they made huge steps quite quickly: in 2008, they visited each other for the first time with the intention of paying their respects to victims, and two years later they organised a visit to unmarked sites of suffering for which their side was responsible.

Some of the sites we visited were: "Kapija" in Tuzla – the site where in 1995 a shell killed 72 young people right in the middle of the city, as well as the cemetery they were buried in; "Brcanska malta" – the site where in 1992 a YNA procession was attacked as they were retreating from the city as previously agreed; Sijekovac – the site where in 1992 a crime was committed against Serbian civilians; Silos in Kacuni – former detention camp for Croats; Monument to defenders killed in Busovaca; Memorial Room of Busovaca Brigade of CDA; Monument to civilian victims of Doboj; Monument to fallen combatants of Bosnia and Herzegovina Army in the courtyard of the restored mosque, the site in Putnikovo brdo where non-Serbs were taken to serve as a human shield; the Memorial Room to fallen combatants of the Republika Srpska Army from the Doboj area; the Monument to killed civilians and soldiers of the Zavidovici Municipality; "13th Kilometer" – former military camp of "El Mujahid" unit where Serbian prisoners were tortured and killed in 1995; the former detention camp for non-Serb population "Luka" in Brcko; "Lanista" – memorial to Croatian civilians killed in 1992; the village of Bukvik – site of suffering of Serbian civilians; Warehouse in Crkvina, used as detention camp for non-Serb population, where 18 prisoners were massacred on May 7th 1992; Memorial Room of Republika Srpska Army of the Samac Municipality; former detention camp for Serb civilians Silos in Modrica; Potocari near Srebrenica; Pit Bezdana – site of crime against 81 inhabitants of Ljutačka Valley; Memorial church in Nova Bila which served as a wartime hospital for Croatian soldiers and civilians, etc.

Despite the fact that these activities represent a major turnaround in the rooted narratives about the war and treatment of victims, when all is said and done, they are in fact intimate steps of individuals made in a relatively safe group where they know most of the other people. And as usually happens with us, but also with the war veterans we work with, we wondered what the next feasible thing would be.

---

are unmarked – there is no memorial, no reminder about what had happened at that place. Thus, many former prison camps are now used for other purposes (storehouses, schools, etc.) and traces of past atrocities do not exist anymore.

## Joining commemorations

The next step, still gaining momentum, is attending public events: joint participation of a mixed group of war veterans at commemorations. Unlike 'private visits', commemorations are characterised by the fact that they are not organised by us in a safe space among select participants, but are instead open to the public and anyone can attend. As a rule, these are monoethnic gatherings. They are inevitably accompanied by nationalist iconography and adequate manifestations, along with speeches which need to remind us of how we suffered, and even more so who our enemy was. Just so it is known. Of course, it is utterly unexpected for the very enemy to attend the commemoration. But, there were some brave 'enemies' who dared come, knowing full well they would be confronted with a fairly unpleasant picture of themselves. However, the presence of this 'enemy' can very much influence the regular rhetoric and make it, if not change, then at least sound a bit off and hoarse in the throat of the speaker as result of the fact that what is said can hurt the feelings of some of the people attending, who came to pay their respects with pure hearts.

For example, in June 2013 at the invitation of the veterans' organisation from Zavidovici, Bosnia, we went to the commemoration of the anniversary of the Battle for Elevation 715, which is of great importance for the region as a great number of people died in it. Several war veterans from various Bosnian armies also came. Prior to the start of the programme, one of the organisers approached us to tell us he knew who we were and what we were doing and to welcome us. And, interestingly, to mention that he would use the term 'aggressor' in his speech. This speaks of the fact that the man respects the fact that these unusual guests came, that he is aware of how certain rhetoric may be a problem for some of them and to apologise, in a way, for having to use it. It is these very situations that create space for true dialogue.

## Crossing borders: Three Examples

Early on in our work with war veterans, it was clear to us that we were working on constructive dealing with the past, making three steps forward one step back at that, but we were reluctant to call it peacebuilding work as well. We rather called it anti-war events, stopping peace degrading or prevention of a future war. As this work was transforming and becoming more profound, we concluded we were in fact working on – reconciliation. Because it was building, rebuilding, redesigning and healing 'the torn fabric' of interpersonal, community and cross-border lives and relationships.<sup>10</sup>

Example 1: In May 2012, CNA received an invitation from a combatants' organisation from Brcko, Bosnia and Herzegovina, to attend the unveiling of the monument to fallen combatants of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We experienced this as an honour and an act of trust towards us.

We hadn't been sure of how the people gathered there would accept us. Our friend Avdija, a war veteran who was on the organising board, warned us that the situation could be uncomfortable. We had been aware of this, of course, but his concern had an encouraging effect on us.

---

10 See Lederach, John Paul (2001). 'Civil Society and Reconciliation'. In C. A. Crocker, et al., eds. *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*. Washington D.C.: USIP, p. 852.







When we arrived, we were cordially greeted by the hosts. They explained to us where to stand, what to do. The rhetoric of the programme was not pronouncedly nationalist, quite moderate, in fact. There were a lot of media, a lot of TV cameras. After the performance, families of the killed were the first to lay wreathes, followed by the combatants' associations. And then, before mentioning representatives of authorities and political parties, the speaker announced, 'Centre for Non-violent Action from Belgrade and Sarajevo'. Being mentioned at all was in itself a great honour. We were nervous about how people would react to the mention of Belgrade in such a context. Silence ensued, three seconds of it, an eternity. And then applause broke out.

When we laid flowers and stepped down, we were greeted by our friends from among the combatants who came up to us to thank us for coming. "I am really happy we did this," says Nenad, whose eyes well up with tears on mere recollection.

Example 2: CNA arranged a meeting with the president of a local branch of the Republika Srpska Veterans' Organisation. This town is known for being one of the 'tougher cookies' in the nationalist sense, many war crimes against Bosniaks were committed there, which is denied or minimised on a massive scale. We expected the man we were to meet to be very reserved towards the entire idea, we didn't know whether we would manage to agree on any kind of collaboration whatsoever, but it was important that we try. Two members of the CNA team went to the meeting, both of them Bosniak war veterans. They presented what we were doing together with war veterans from the region and what we wanted to achieve. The atmosphere at the meeting was a lot more cordial than we had expected. Suddenly, this man, president of the local combatants association, says in confidence to his guests that he feels bad for what had happened in his town. It was a kind of apology and empathy. These words have great and important meaning, for the very reason that they are not heard much, and are necessary in order for us to move at least a step further and feel safer with each other. If this man were to say these words in public, they would have a major impact and create space for changing the attitude towards the past. Maybe one day he will dare to do so, he or someone else. For the time being it seems it's good enough for him to admit it to the 'enemy' and express his regret.

Example 3: We visited Sijekovac in northern Bosnia and Herzegovina with a group of war veterans. At the very start of the war, a crime was committed there against local civilians, and this crime is a symbol of suffering for the Serbs. A memorial church was erected there to commemorate this event. The weather was bleak, a constant drizzle. An elderly woman came by who had no idea who we were, who the people who arrived were, she thought we were all Serbs. And she started telling her story about this crime, of pain, of suffering of innocent locals and Serb people. People were listening to her very attentively. After her account, she asked us who we were. When we explained, her reaction was 'Oh, I hope I didn't offend anyone by what I just said'. She was very pleased to hear these were combatants from different sides. And she thanked us for coming. This encounter meant a great deal to all of us and was an incentive for us to continue.

## **Coping with hardship and difficulties**

This work carries a lot with it. It entails thousands of kilometres on the road, meetings with

various veterans' associations, who are full of suspicion as a rule. Often they are very reserved, or seem to be interested and decide to join an activity and then never answer the phone again. It's these initial contacts that can be particularly difficult. When you sit in an office of a combatants' association with a big picture of Ratko Mladic decorating the wall; or visiting others, who when speaking of the wartime period say how they expelled the Serbs at the very start, and were right to do so, and the Bosniaks they drove out a bit later, because they failed to obey. Or, elsewhere, where a disabled war veteran, a military man, is astounded: "What is it that you want, you want to bring Serbs here to me?" These things are not easy to hear and observe calmly.

And once they are won as allies to take part in an activity, this is just the start. Then it's dealing with wartime horror that follows. We constantly bring both ourselves and them to talking about the war. Many of them are disabled. Some of them had their closest family members killed. Some were still children when they took up guns. They had been through all kinds of ordeals. Some were treated for PTSD. Adnan notes: "You hear so much about the suffering of others and your very heart falls ill." But this process is necessary for us in the region to overcome the need to quarrel at the level of political pamphlets and to recognise the humanness in each other. One war veteran said it was only then that he started to think of how the man on the other side also had a mother, a sister... Of course, each visit to sites of wartime crimes is an affliction in itself. As Amer puts it: "You feel sorry for these people, but also sorry for yourself. It creates some sort of hurt."

It is also hard for us when some of the combatants experience unpleasantness or even threats in their own communities because they "meet with the enemies".

One of the situations that we experienced as very difficult was a prepared, but unrealised visit to sites of memory in a town in Croatia. We did expect obstacles, since this activity and its approach might not be suitable in a context where you have a clear winner of the war. This was supposed to be the first of such visits to Croatia. Our hosts and also the organisers were supposed to be the veterans from this Croatian town who had already attended our trainings. It had been agreed for war veterans from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia to come and attend. However, two days before our departure, the visit was cancelled. The organisers received threats, so they were concerned for the safety of the guests, but also their own. The plan was therefore modified on the go, so we agreed to all meet after all, in a town in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in order for us to find a way to offer support to them nonetheless. And we did go on the road. Many times that day we tried to call our veterans from Croatia, to ask how they were and check if they were coming. We never managed to get in touch with them. The next morning, we all gathered, and they were not there. Eighteen people came to offer support, and they didn't show up, or call. They never explained that since. We believe the pressure on them was too high. But, this contact died out. And we still haven't managed to organise a single visit to memorial sites and sites of suffering in Croatia.

### **Sources of motivation and the importance of humour**

When we start to feel down because of sorrow or difficulty of a situation or because it all seems hopeless, we remember why we started all this in the first place. We do it because it makes sense. Because small wheels start to move which will one day, we hope, set the whole mechanism in motion.

For example, Nenad says he was especially motivated to continue this work when he realised he wrongly estimated the ability of some people to change. He was tempted to drop one man because he passionately defended Ratko Mladic during the first training. And yet five years later, this man went to Potocari himself to pay respects to the victims. This man made greater steps than many of us.

Nedžad says he realised his source of motivation for work with war veterans is the fact he admires them in a way. Because of how they deal with their experience of war and because they can find room to understand another man in spite of everything and cross over these ethnic borders. Adnan adds he is also motivated by the veterans' courage, the fact that they are prepared to take risks and face their communities. We get more motivated also when we feel we have made some things shift radically, when we feel people were moved, that this work was of importance.

The fact remains that this work brings with it a lot of hardship, pain and suffering. But there is also laughter. We laugh a lot and make jokes. It's mostly black humour, but it's healing. This is one of the vents, but also one of the motors of energy.

For example, war veterans went to a Bosniak commemoration together. The man who was giving a speech used the word 'chetniks'<sup>11</sup> every now and again. Later on, we asked several Serbs among our veterans how they felt listening to that. They said they didn't mind, one of them said this was not in reference to him, as he was no chetnik. Then a Croat among them adds he felt left out, as they never mentioned ustasas<sup>12</sup> one single time.

Or when two veterans meet, a Bosniak and a Serb, and they embrace each other cordially, and then one of them comments, "By God, this has gone too far." Come on, two combatants, a Bosniak and a Serb, hugging each other! And they all burst into a bout boisterous laughter.

One can't go too far, but I hope this will go far enough.

## **Summary and perspectives**

Ex-combatants are usually perceived as spoilers of a peace processes, as those who foster hatred, enemy images and dominant righteous narratives and who oppose the reconciliation process. And this stereotype is not without reason, as combatants usually are at the helm of authoritative regimes after wars. But that makes it even more important to search for ways to engage these people in peacebuilding activities. Ex-combatants committed to peacebuilding have enormous potential for deconstructing enemy images and for reducing rifts of fear and hatred produced by violence. When they realise that their contribution is useful and constructive, when they feel that they are needed to

---

11 It is used as a derogatory term for ethnic Serbs: it is an image of a violent dangerous man, with long unkempt hair and beard, with a knife and blood on his hands who hates non-Serbs. The background of the term are members of the Serbian nationalist forces, chetniks, who were supposed to resist the Axis invaders, but they were primarily fighting a civil war that was going on within World War II, mainly against the partisans.

12 It is used as a derogatory term for ethnic Croats: it is an image of a violent and mean man, dressed in black, who hates non-Croats. Ustasas were the Croatian nationalist far-right movement. They ruled the fascist regime of the Independent State of Croatia during World War II under the auspices of the Third Reich.



do work for the benefit of everyone, that is the moment when they mobilise themselves in the service of peacebuilding.

Our experience shows that thorough/non-selective dealing with the past, review of one's own actions and responsibility is crucial, prior to engagement in proper peacebuilding work across borders. Encounters with (former) enemies help a lot in this process, when people have an opportunity to get direct feedback and hear the fears and needs of others, when they can ask each other why they fought, what is the root of hatred, do they really feel this enmity against each other, or perhaps against some imaginary enemy, a necessary part of the dominant narrative. Trainings offer space safe enough for such discussions and processes to take place within a group and individually.

One should bear in mind that it is often easier to meet 'the enemy' and even make friends with him, rather than returning to one's own community and challenging the environment to change. This is a bit easier when people are not alone, but have a team, a few colleagues who support each other. However, the question of personal security is always pertinent.

In this text you could read about how our work and cooperation with war veterans has developed and about the big steps they have already made. And while some steps are only just gaining momentum, we already dream of the ones to follow. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are many unmarked sites of suffering: detention camps and crime sites. Survivors and families of the perished unsuccessfully keep trying to have these sites marked, which is refused by local authorities. More often than not, they are ethnic minorities in such municipalities. We now envision initiatives for marking these sites led by war veterans, members of the same ethnic group as the perpetrators of these crimes. War veterans, as 'defenders of their own people', enjoy a fair amount of credibility, which would increase the chances of such sites being marked. It would be a huge step, in terms of creating public readiness for unconditional and unselective reconciliation. Some things are already being done towards the realisation of this dream, and two years ago, during a veterans' visit to Zavidovici, one former combatant of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, publicly, for the first time, requested of the municipality president to have the site of suffering of Serb civilians at the so called "13th kilometres" marked.

I hope that the time will come when we ourselves will point out the wrongdoings committed in our name, instead of having others point fingers at us. When we will stop the blame shifting game.

The path we have walked together can't be erased by anything. The marks left are no longer just war scars on bodies and souls, but a shared journey and a quest for peace between us and within us. A journey on which we became human again, to ourselves and to each other.