

Nenad Vukosavljević

To Perceive the “Enemy” as a Human Being

**Difficult efforts for reconciliation in
former Yugoslavia—Nonviolence as a
means of overcoming hatred based on
selective commemoration**

Nenad Vukosavljević, born in 1967, grew up in Belgrade in former Yugoslavia. He refused to do his military service, which brought him a short-term military detention, and fled to Germany in 1990. There, he attended the first International Training in Nonviolent Action at KURVE Wustrow. With their support, he went to Bosnia and Herzegovina after the Balkan wars in 1997 in order to promote reconciliation between the ethnic groups that were bitterly hostile towards each other. The Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA), which he founded and which has been a KURVE Wustrow partner ever since, is still one of the Balkan’s leading organisations for peacebuilding. It specifically addresses war veterans as key actors in an effective reconciliation process.



It's only when you meet the 'enemies' personally and perceive them as human beings that you can overcome the hate-filled black-and-white picture of friends and enemies. As long as this isn't working, there is always a danger of violent conflicts flaring up again." This belief has motivated Nenad Vukosavljević for the last 25 years to promote direct contacts between the previously warring factions of former Yugoslavia. By facilitating such personal meetings, the Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA), which he founded, has furthered peace-building in the Balkans decisively and has always been supported in these efforts by KURVE Wustrow.

When Nenad got his draft call for military service in the Yugoslav armed forces, he refused to comply. For the next three weeks, he was held in military detention and, after his release, he faced the strong risk of being imprisoned again. So he eventually fled from his home town of Belgrade, went to England and Ireland and ended up in Germany in 1990. There, he made contact with various peace groups, including KURVE Wustrow—the latter being of interest to him because of connections to the Balkan Peace Team. In 1995, he attended the organisation's first International Training.

"From the very beginning, I was impressed by KURVE Wustrow's competence to deal with differences

amongst human beings", Nenad stresses. "There were no fixed patterns that one had to fit into or rigid expectations that one had to fulfill. Their main goal was to convince us that we can achieve something with nonviolent action. This seed of nonviolence certainly germinated for me. I also appreciated the international solidarity which I experienced in Wustrow, and I wanted to spread it myself in later years."

Supported by KURVE Wustrow, Nenad went to Sarajevo after the Bosnian war and founded CNA with the aim of initiating reconciliation between the ethnic groups that were then bitterly hostile towards each other. It was a very hard beginning, as he remembers: "The term nonviolence didn't exist in the Bosnian vocabulary in 1997. People talked only in categories of perpetrators and victims of violent conflict, and all sides insisted upon their specific views and interpretations of what had happened. We wanted to break through this vicious circle and build bridges."

To achieve this, a lengthy process was required which had to be started very carefully with a cautious step-by-step approach. "For about seven years, we were just engaged in preparations and were hardly visible in the public eye. We had to win over people in key positions, connect them with each other, built up trust and prepare them for further



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personal meetings”, Nenad explains. “In this context, it was vital to make each side aware that their so-called enemies were human beings with feelings and that they actually all had suffered during the war. Only this revelation made it possible to overcome the fear of each other and eventually also the deep-seated hatred.”

The protagonists of such a reconciliation process were often vilified as traitors, sometimes they were also

put under pressure by the authorities. Nevertheless, Nenad and his CNA team were not perturbed in their untiring efforts. They organised workshops and public discussions which soon got noticed in the media. And in the end, they specifically involved war veterans and their associations into peacebuilding. “When the latter started to embrace dialogue and reconciliation, it sent out a much stronger signal than when civil society activists were the only ones to call for peace”, says Nenad. “This resulted into proper chain reactions.”

Ex-combatants of diverse ethnic groups started to show each other their home towns, including local landmarks with a specific significance regarding the war. In another project, participants from both sides marked such important sites that had officially been ignored and set up monuments which do not glorify just one side but commemorate all those involved. “During official memorial services, it is common that the views of only one side are represented. This selective commemoration, however, is, in its final consequence, a continuation of war and can permanently poison our whole society”, Nenad deplures. “We have always tried to counteract this by an inclusive approach which implies acknowledgement that everyone involved had suffered as a human being and not just as a social stereotype. And sometimes we

were even more successful than we would have dared to hope for.”

Nenad recalls a very impressive example. Around 2008, a colonel of the Bosnian-Serb armed forces attended a CNA workshop. Initially, he showed contempt for the trainings in nonviolence and started to praise the Serbian general Ratko Mladic who was later found guilty of genocide during the Bosnian war and got a prison sentence for life. “I thought this colonel was beyond redemption and felt like throwing him out of my workshop”, Nenad remembers. “Nevertheless he stayed on and, a few years later, we were all taken by surprise how he had changed.”

After thorough preparations until 2012, previously hostile ex-combatants from Nenad’s workshops were finally ready to visit Srebrenica together—the site of a massacre of more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims in July 1995. The aforementioned colonel declared totally unexpectedly that he had been to this place before and really wanted to go there again. When the site was reached, he suddenly asked for permission to lay the groups wreath. He then expressed his deep shame for the atrocities committed by members of his armed forces against the Bosniaks and conveyed his sympathy and condolences.

“I’m very glad that I initially underestimated this colonel”, Nenad em-

phasises. “This, however, is the very power of nonviolence which eventually wins the upper hand. Surely this doesn’t extinguish the memories of war, but once people have opened up to the idea of reconciliation, there is bound to be a permanent impact. They can’t just return to unlimited hatred.”

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