A Study of Perceived Parental Communication and Propensity towards Reconciliation among Youth in Vukovar (Croatia)

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This paper explores some socio-psychological factors that might be indicative of the willingness of young people to establish post-conflict intergroup relationships in the city of Vukovar in Croatia. It is based on a study involving 254 students (132 male and 122 female) from the University of Vukovar and high schools, who identified themselves with one of the two ethnic groups associated with the conflict in Croatia; Croats ($N = 165$) and Serbs ($N = 89$). Participants completed a questionnaire on perceived parental communication, styles of adolescent conflict management within the family, their sense of victimhood, and their propensity towards reconciliation with youth belonging to the out-group. As expected, results confirm that sense of victimhood, referring to the loss of or damage to one's house and to personal losses and threats to one's own life or to the lives of significant others, is associated with negative emotions towards youth belonging to the out-group and less propensity towards reconciliation. Moreover, results show that perceived constructive parental communication is associated with higher propensity towards reconciliation among youth belonging to the out-group. Interestingly, the results suggest that young people who perceived their parents using constructive and non-aggressive relational communication (versus those who are verbally aggressive) seem to have a greater propensity towards reconciliation even when the young people in question experienced a high sense of victimhood. The paper discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the findings for improving communication and enhancing understanding between groups in post-conflict areas.

Keywords: parental communication, adolescent conflict management, victimhood, reconciliation in post-conflict areas

1. Introduction

This study explores the role of some socio-psychological variables in the process of reconciliation among young people in the city of Vukovar in Croatia. It focuses on the effects of perceived parental communication on readiness for dialogue and

reconciliation among young people. We assume a positive relationship between perceived constructive parental communication and young people's willingness to establish relationships with out-group members. The results of this study are discussed in terms of their theoretical and practical implications for improving communication between groups in post-conflict areas. The paper will first present a brief outline of the history of the conflict in Croatia and in the city of Vukovar (for a more detailed analysis see Banac, 2001; Gagnon, 2004; Ramet, 1996, 2005, 2009; Žunec, 1998).

1.1. Historical background of the conflict in Vukovar

As Yugoslavia began to break up in late 1980s and in early 1990s, Serbia's President Slobodan Milošević and the newly elected President of Croatia Franjo Tuđman started to pursue nationalist politics. Tuđman's programme was opposed by Croatia's Serbian minority who saw it as a reincarnation of the nationalist–fascist Ustasha movement, which had massacred hundreds of thousands of Serbs during World War II (Žerjavić, 1992). When Croatia proclaimed independence from Yugoslavia after a referendum, Serbs in Croatia set up the self-declared Serb Republic of Krajina (Republika Srpska Krajina; RSK), with the support of the Serbian government and Serb paramilitary groups. The Croatian government rapidly lost control of one third of the Republic (Serb-inhabited inland rural regions, almost all of the Dalmatian coast, and much of central and eastern Croatia). Political elites on both sides, together with most of the mass media, started to strongly instigate interethnic tensions and fear (Thompson, 1995). Very soon, sporadic interethnic incidents began to happen, at the beginning mostly between Serb paramilitary formations and the Croatian police. At the same time, fear, a sense of insecurity and a lack of trust began to develop in communities that until then had lived peacefully side by side (Čorkalo Biruški, 2012). Other processes also occurred that further sharpened interethnic boundaries and reinforced in-group bias and nationalism (Ajduković, 2004; Ajduković and Čorkalo Biruški, 2004; Agger and Mimica, 1996; Čorkalo Biruški, 2012; Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković, 2009; Kaufman, 2001). People chose silence without trying to talk to friends and colleagues from the other community about political changes and events, out of fear that such actions might actually exacerbate ethnic tensions (Čorkalo Biruški, 2012). Open conflict broke out in May 1991 close to the city of Vukovar,

when 12 Croatian police officers were killed by Serb paramilitaries (Čorkalo Biruški, 2012). That was perceived by the community as a point of no return, and tensions and incidents also increased in other areas populated by a majority of Serbs. Very soon the Yugoslav National Army, which at the time had most of high officers of Serbian origin, began to intervene in favour of the Serb population in Croatia, and in July 1991 launched a full-scale attack against Croats in Eastern Slavonia, above all in the city of Vukovar (Stover and Weinstein, 2004). The town was under siege for three months and in November 1991 fell to Serbian forces. During that period, the civilian inhabitants who remained in Vukovar lived in squalid conditions, nearing starvation. Much of the city was literally pulverized; 62% of houses were destroyed (Merrill, 1999). Some estimates claim that 1,700 people were killed (almost 4% of the population), almost 10% were wounded, and about 30,000 people, mostly Croats, were forced into exile (Čorkalo Biruški, 2012; Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković, 2012; Tanner, 1997; Zunec, 1998). The number of missing persons is still over 350 (Office of Imprisoned and Missing Persons of the Republic of Croatia, cfr. Čorkalo Biruški and Ajdukovic, 2012).

The Yugoslav authorities ruled the city of Vukovar and some parts of the region of Eastern Slavonia until November 1995, when these were reintegrated into Croatia under the Erdut Agreement, after Croatia reconquered other parts of the Serb Republic of Krajina through military operations. The principal elements of the agreement were: the demilitarization of the region, the return of displaced people, and the integration of the region into the constitutional framework of the Republic of Croatia.

Before the war, the city of Vukovar was inhabited by approximately 44,000 people. It was estimated that there were more than 20 ethnic groups and at least 10 religious groups in the region – a real multicultural environment. A slight majority (47%) of the city's population were Croat. Serbs constituted 32% of the population and other nationalities made up the remainder (Hungarians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, and those who declared themselves Yugoslavs or did not declare their nationality) (Babić, 2002; Croatian National Census, 1991). Prior to 1990, the town's population was characterized by a high percentage of mixed marriages and it was estimated that at least 80% of the population had at least one first or second degree relative of another ethnicity (Babić, 2002; Kay and Olsen, 1993). Before the war, Croats, Serbs and other ethnic groups in Croatia had lived in harmony in mixed communities for centuries,

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sharing schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods without much emphasis on ethnic origin (Ajduković and Čorkalo Biruški, 2004; Čorkalo Biruški, 2012; Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković, 2009; Čorkalo Biruški et al., 2004; Ramet, 2005; Sekulić et al., 2001).

According to the census conducted in 2001, the city's registered population was 31,670 (32% less than in 1991), consisting of 57.5% ethnic Croats, 32.9% ethnic Serbs, and 9.6% of other minorities (Croatian National Census, 2001). Since the Peaceful Reintegration of 1996–1998, a significant number of Croats who had been expelled during wartime only returned to Vukovar in 1999 (Kardov, 2007; Žunec, 1998). The city's registered population was 26,716 in the 2011 census, slightly less than in 2001 (Croatian National Census, 2011).

Since the end of the conflict in Croatia in 1995, the challenge of building sustainable coexistence between Croats and Serbs in Vukovar has proven hard to achieve. Negative emotions of anger, bitterness and hatred among the groups are still difficult to overcome. There has been a polarization along ethnic lines in all institutions, including schools, local radio stations, sports clubs and cultural associations, and people from Croatian and Serbian ethnic groups hardly communicate with each other (Ajduković and Čorkalo Biruški, 2008; Čorkalo Biruški, 2012; Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković, 2008, 2012; Kardov, 2002, 2006, 2007). Teaching in schools in Vukovar and its surrounding areas is organized according to a Croatian teaching plan and programme in such a way that enables members of minorities to exercise their right to education in their language and alphabet in separate classes. Nurseries and primary schools have been ethnically divided since the war. In the initial post-conflict years, secondary schools in Vukovar used separated buildings. Since 2007, in three of the four secondary schools children attend classes in different shifts in the same building, and in only one do they attend separate classes in the same shift. Croat children are taught in Croatian, while Serb children in Serbian. In 2005, the University of Vukovar "Lavoslav Ružička" was established, which provides a forum for contact between members of young people from both groups who plan to go on to higher education in Vukovar. Other problems affecting the city include: a destroyed economy, high unemployment rates, and limited political opposition, among others. People in Vukovar still predominantly vote for parties which are perceived as protective of their ethnic interests.

This study intends to explore some socio-psychological factors that may facilitate a willingness among young people to establish intergroup dialogue in

Vukovar. Specifically, it examines the role of perceived parental communication as a potential factor that may moderate the relationship between the sense of victimhood and a propensity towards reconciliation. While there may exist a relatively pessimistic attitude towards the ability to build bridges among the adult population, children and young people might find a way to build more positive relationships, despite the fact that until now they have not had many real opportunities to meet and socialize with members of the other group.

1.2 Impact of the war on young people and sense of victimhood

In this section we briefly outline the psychological impact of the war on people and on their sense of victimhood. While research is still inconclusive, many studies have shown a significant relationship between war trauma, victimhood and measures towards reconciliation. Hewstone *et al.* (2004) found a weak but significant negative correlation between personal victimhood and forgiveness in Northern Ireland. Similarly, Staub *et al.* (2005) found a weak but significant negative relationship between trauma symptoms and readiness for reconciliation in Rwanda. In Croatia, Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković (2009) found that traumatic experiences such as personal losses and threats to one's own life or to the life of significant others (for example, being a witness to violence or deaths or being wounded) were negative predictors of reconciliation. However, other widely experienced stressful events such as the loss of one's house and personal belongings, family separation, unemployment, etc.) were not predictive of reconciliation. In addition, in another study (Čorkalo Biruški and Penić, forthcoming) it emerged that the relationships between war experiences and social distance and nationalism were mediated by in-group identification and collective guilt assignment.

Several studies have illustrated the negative psychological impact which conflict can have on the social development of young people (e.g., Boyden, 2003; Cairns *et al*., 1995; Ferguson and Cairns, 2002; Gallagher, 2004; Muldoon and Trew, 2000; Smyth, Fay, Brough and Hamilton, 2004). A few longitudinal studies have been conducted on the long-term consequences of war on children and these have confirmed the detrimental effects of war on children's psychological adaptation and development (Punamäki *et al*., 1997). Although most of the young people considered in this study were born only three or four years before the end of the conflict in

Croatia, and have lived their childhood and teenage years in the post-conflict period, many have still been exposed to a certain level of violence and tension. They experienced frequent shelling during the war, separation from loved ones, destruction of their houses, poverty, homelessness, and some had unfortunately experienced loss and bereavement of significant others (Ajduković and Čorkalo Biruški, 2004; Čorkalo Biruški, 2012; Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković, 2009).

Some young people, whose parents left Vukovar before the conflict, had little if any direct personal experience of violence as a result of the political conflict, but almost all had intimate knowledge of how their "community", parents, and relatives had suffered and how they had been affected by the conflict. Children and youth are often exposed to the attitudes and ethnic prejudices of their parents and teachers, which can fill them with hatred. Young people, through the narratives and stories of victimhood, start to feel like vicarious victims themselves (Lickel *et al.*,, 2006). Most people cultivate a sense of grievance and victimhood, keeping painful feelings inside them without talking about them. Furthermore, many people lack the skills for non-violent communication: they do not know how to argue in conflict situations without anger and passion, and consequently express verbal aggressiveness or react impulsively and emotionally (Kosić and Tauber, 2010). Children and youth from such families have few opportunities to find positive role models for how to deal with problems through communication.

Based on the results of the earlier studies mentioned above (Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković, 2009), this study aims to explore the relationship between different types of trauma/victimhood, and the propensity towards reconciliation among young people in Vukovar. We hypothesized a negative relationship, especially in the event of strong trauma such as being personally wounded during the war or having someone within the family wounded or killed. In addition, we hypothesized that this relationship might be moderated by parental communication. Below we explain the rationale for this hypothesis.

1.3 Parental communication

This study is focused on young people's perception of parental communication as a factor that may moderate the relationship between a sense of victimhood and a propensity towards reconciliation with the out-group. We hypothesize that young

people who perceive their parents as being verbally aggressive and dominant in family interactions will express a lower propensity towards reconciliation and will be less open to accepting social relationships with members of the other ethnic group. And, conversely, that young people who perceive their parents as being calm and non-aggressive in family interactions will express a higher propensity towards reconciliation and social relationships with members of the other ethnic group.

Communication is learned, and the most important sources that teach us our style of communication are our family, school, peers, the mass media and the larger society. We learn from others, not only words, but also how to express them. Children will thus learn from their parents' styles of communication and conflict management. They will observe the way their parents interact and communicate to them, to others, and between themselves. According to social learning theory, learning through modelling is the method by which most human behaviour is learned (Bandura, 1977). The family is also the context where young people encounter conflict and develop the skills to manage those conflicts, as well as how to control the emotions and behaviours associated with conflict (Galvin and Brommel, 1996; McLeod *et al*., 1972). Modes of communication that children/adolescents learn and develop within their family may have a great impact on the social relationships in their later lives. By the time children become adolescents, they may no longer blindly copy adults but they will still preserve many of the behavioural patterns they learnt throughout their childhood, including communication and conflict management styles.

A number of communication and conflict management styles have been proposed (for a review see Van de Vliert, 1997). Kurdek (1994) suggested three conflict resolution styles: positive problem solving, conflict engagement and withdrawal. Positive problem solving involves trying to understand the others' position and using constructive reasoning tactics to work out compliance. Conflict engagement involves being verbally abusive, angry, defensive or attacking, or losing self-control. Withdrawal involves avoiding the problem, avoiding talking and becoming distant.

Morgan *et al.* (1990) found that adolescents who had adopted their typical family communication patterns responded with similar patterns to conflicts both inside and outside of their homes. For some individuals, family life may be an excellent source of solace and support, but for others it is connected to stress, and characterized by verbally aggressive communication or physical violence. Many

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parents use aggressive verbal communication or even physical punishment to discipline their children. Parents who are physically or verbally aggressive with one another or with their children serve as models for generalized aggressive behaviour. If a child observes one of their parents using physical aggression, their likelihood of using physical aggression is likely to increase. Beyers *et al*. (2001) found deficient parent–child communication to be a factor for future aggressive behaviour among male adolescents in areas of low socioeconomic development. The parental use of verbal aggressiveness can cause disruption in the relationship between the child and the parent. When a parent uses verbally aggressive behaviour children are often frightened, which leads to avoidance of the parent. Verbal aggressiveness causes the child to feel fear and anxiety and the child subsequently loses trust in the relationship. These children are more likely to be aggressive in their peer interactions (Patterson, Dishion and Bank, 1984), and to engage in various forms of delinquent behaviour (Cashwell and Vacc, 1996). Adolescents who grow up surrounded by destructive conflict within their families or whose parents did not encourage them to constructively assert their views might have difficulties in social relations with others (Carney, 2008; Rands *et al*., 1981). Children exposed to parental verbal and physical aggression show higher levels of aggressiveness and a greater inclination to delinquent behaviour than children exposed only to verbal aggression (Vissing *et al*., 1991). In addition, Camara and Resnick (1989) showed that verbal attacks and avoidance tactics used by parents to resolve conflicts, as well as physical aggression from the father, were associated with poorer adjustment (e.g., depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, aggression and social withdrawal). On the other hand, parents who used positive problem solving (Tucker *et al*., 2003) and compromise (Rubenstein and Feldman, 1993) were found to be related to fewer externalizing and internalizing problems. Parents who used negotiation and compromise to resolve disagreements were more likely to have children who displayed a higher level of social competence in interactions with their peers (Dadds *et al*., 1999) and self-esteem (Olds and Papilla, 1992). McLeod and colleagues (1972) found that children were more aggressive if they grew up in a family environment where free expression of opinion was discouraged.

More recently, Ledbetter (2009) has also suggested that family communication patterns influence extra-familial relationships. Specifically, young adults from high conversation-orientated families engage in more face-to-face maintenance behaviours,

which are positively associated with friendship closeness. In general, family communication appears to influence a child's ability to cope with various situations outside the family environment, their attitudes and their behaviour in a number of areas (Kinsfogel and Grych, 2004; Koerner and Fitzpatrick, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2006; Koesten, 2004; Koesten and Anderson, 2004; Lucas-Thompson and Clarke-Stewart, 2007), and plays an essential part in cultivating an individual's personality characteristics, such as shyness (Huang, 1999), neuroticism (McCrae and Costa, 1988), anxiety (e.g., Avtgis, 1999; Huang, 1999), reticence (Keaten and Kelly, 2000; Kelly *et al.*, 2002), self-esteem and well-being (Schrodt *et al.* 2007). According to Davies *et al.* (2002), ongoing, intensive family conflict leads to emotional insecurity in children, who may consequently exhibit higher emotional reactivity. In the long run, emotional insecurity can undermine children's ability to regulate negative emotions such as anger, sadness and fear (Davies *et al.*, 2002). Children with high emotion regulation abilities behave adequately in a social context, while those who cannot balance their emotions often demonstrate unconstructive behaviour. This suggests that emotion regulation ability is positively related to social competence and the quality of social relationships (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2004).

This brief review of the existing literature highlights the multiple psychological consequences of perceived parental communication. On the basis of the studies described we may argue that it is likely that these home-learnt styles of communication may influence the way young people interact with others, including members from relevant out-groups. Thus, we assume that young people who see their parents using constructive and non-aggressive relational styles may develop more constructive and healthy conflict management styles, and consequently may create more positive social relationships and display a higher propensity towards reconciliation with young persons from the out-group than the youth who perceive that their parents use dominant and aggressive relational styles within the family. In addition, we hypothesized that perceived parental communication might moderate the relationship between a sense of victimhood and a propensity towards reconciliation with the other ethnic group. More specifically, we hypothesized that young people who perceived their parents as being constructive and non-verbally aggressive within the family would express greater openness towards reconciliation, even if they had experienced higher levels of victimhood than those young people who perceived their parents as being verbally aggressive within the family.

1.4 Propensity towards reconciliation

In this section, we explain the significance of reconciliation, and introduce some factors that might help the process of reconciliation among young people. There is a lack of consensus among scholars and practitioners about the meaning of reconciliation, which has resulted in multiple definitions. The English word "reconciliation" has its etymological roots in the Latin *reconciliare*: *re-* meaning "again", and *conciliare* meaning "make friendly". Reconciliation should involve different levels: (a) the interpersonal level which refers to the relationships between individuals; (b) the societal level, referred to as community or social reconciliation; and (c) the broader political level which refers to building bridges and relationships between opposing parties and nations. Within these three levels, key concepts such as "forgiveness", "peaceful relationships", "tolerance", "coexistence", "truth", and "justice", are the most common elements identified as required for, or associated with, reconciliation. Lederach (1997, 1999) has incorporated some of these aspects and defines reconciliation as building relationships through the engagement of conflicting parties in a process built on truth, mercy, justice and peace.

Generally, according to psychological theories, reconciliation can be defined as a process which is marked by changes from beliefs, attitudes, emotions and patterns of behaviour reflecting an overall negative orientation toward the adversary group to a more positive orientation, mutual respect and the re-humanization of the other (Bar-Tal and Bennink, 2004; Lederach, 1997; Nadler and Shnabel, 2008). Fundamental to the reconciliation process is the restoration and rebuilding of relationships and it must start from the bottom up (Galtung, 1996). This highlights the need for improved communication and better understanding between individuals and groups, which could lead to greater cooperation and coexistence at the individual and group levels. Another view of what reconciliation means is the centrality of peaceful relationships. Identified as one of the principal factors for promoting the maintenance and consolidation of stable peace, reconciliation is understood to mean the 'formation or restoration of a genuine peaceful relationship between societies that have been involved in an intractable conflict, after its formal resolutions is achieved' (Bar-Tal and Bennink, 2004: 15). This definition situates reconciliation at the societal level although the process of change involves individuals and groups. To Kriesberg (1998a/b) reconciliation refers both to a quality inherent in a relationship – 'a

relatively amicable relationship, typically established after a rupture in the relationship involving one-sided or mutual infliction of extreme injury' – and to a process – 'the process of developing a mutually conciliatory accommodation between antagonistic persons or groups' (Kriesberg, 1998a: 184). Elsewhere, he associated reconciliation with accommodative ways by which members of adversarial entities have been able to put aside feelings of hate, fear and loathing, to discard views of the other as dangerous and subhuman, and to abandon the desire for revenge and retribution (Kriesberg, 1998a). Bar-Tal and Bennink (2004) suggest that reconciliation consists of recognition and acceptance of one another in the spirit of jointly invested interests and goals in developing peaceful relations. This includes building mutual trust, positive attitudes and showing sensitivity for one another's needs and interests. Further to the debate surrounding reconciliation is the element of coexistence (Kriesberg, 2000). As noted by Hamber and Kelly (2009), proponents of coexistence seek to establish a society where disagreements are peacefully discussed and resolved. Two levels of connectedness or coexistence are identified in the literature: the integrated stage during which members of different ethnic, racial or religious groups live in harmony with one another; and the minimalist stage during which members of society live together, without violence. Whatever the degree of coexistence as an element of reconciliation, the core issues are understanding, confidence building, trust and respect for one another. Reconciliation requires a change in emotional orientation away from fear, anger and hatred and towards hope and a positive outlook of the future (Bar-Tal, 2000; Jarymowicz and Bar-Tal, 2006).

In this study, in accordance with the theories described above, we have defined the process of reconciliation as a willingness to accept social relationships with the other ethnic group and as emotional orientation towards that group.

2. Study

2.1 Participants

The sample consisted of 254 students at the university (37%) and in all four high schools (63%) of Vukovar. In each school, two classes of the last year were selected, one Croatian and the other Serbian. The average age of the participants was 18.32 years (ranging from 17 to 26 years), with 132 male and 122 female respondents. Each

respondent identified themselves with one of the two groups associated with the conflict in Croatia; Croats ($N = 165$) and Serbs ($N = 89$). The initial sample also included participants from mixed marriage ($N = 17$), who were later excluded from the analysis.

2.2 Procedure

The data were collected at the beginning of 2008, after a special permit was obtained from the Ministry of Education in Croatia. The school directors were contacted by a formal letter to obtain their permission to conduct the survey; upon approval, the researcher was introduced to classes in their last year of secondary school – one Croatian and one Serbian. In the same period, the University "Lavoslav Ružička" of Vukovar was contacted and, after the permit to conduct the study was received from the Rector, the researcher was introduced to some of the students during regular class hours.

Participants completed a questionnaire in Croatian or Serbian in the presence of the researcher and their teacher. Instructions were given by the researcher in Croatian or in Serbian, and the role of the teacher was to remain completely passive during the surveys. The researcher briefly explained the objectives of the study, and noted that anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Moreover, the participants were informed that they were free to discontinue the survey at any time. Questions addressing socio-demographic characteristics (such as age, gender and social class) were asked prior to the sequence of scales. These are described below.

2.3 Measures

Perceived parental communication

In order to obtain a multifaceted perspective of perceived parental communication, participants completed two measures. We asked them to rate five items relating to their mother's and father's communication in interactions within family, respectively. These were: my father/mother is nervous and angry; my father/mother throws insults and digs; my father/mother is quarrelsome; my father/mother is calm and patient; my father/mother is mild in relations. From factorial analyses, there emerged a mono-factorial structure for each of the scales, explaining respectively 63.40% and 62.05% of variance. Two indexes were calculated by summing responses, after reversing

negative items. Thus, higher results indicated a more constructive communication by the father ($\alpha = 0.85$) and the mother ($\alpha = 0.84$), while lower scores indicated more aggressive relational communication. An aggregate index of perceived parental communication was created by summing responses along these two indexes ($\alpha = 0.84$; $M = 5.38$, $SD = 0.99$; min = 2.20 and max = 7.00). In order to check whether there were any significant differences in this variable an ANOVA was performed using age (dichotomized), gender, ethnic origin (Croats versus Serbs), and educational context (university versus secondary schools) as independent variables. We did not find any significant differences for this measure.

Adolescent conflict management styles within the family

We used an adaptation of Kurdek's Conflict Resolution Style Inventory CRSI (Kurdek, 1994) to measure conflict management styles with parents. We asked participants on an 11-item scale how they would react to a frustrating situation when their parents did not allow them to go to an important party. Examples included: 'trying to find solutions that are acceptable for both sides'; 'remaining silent for long periods of time'; 'throwing insults and digs', and so on. A factor emerged from the factorial analysis, which explained 36.89% of variance. An index was calculated by summing the items measuring this factor, and higher scores represented constructive conflict management styles (versus non constructive) – ($\alpha = 0.82$; $M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.04$; min = 1.27; max = 7.00). In order to check whether there were any significant differences in this variable an ANOVA was performed using age (dichotomized), gender, ethnic origin (Croats versus Serbs), and educational context (university versus secondary schools) as independent variables. We did not find any significant differences for this measure.

Sense of victimhood

Sense of victimhood was measured by three questions which asked participants: (a) if their house had been damaged or destroyed during the war; (b) if they or somebody from their family had been wounded during the war; and (c) if somebody from their family had lost their life during the war – personal losses (Boal *et al*., 1997; Hayes and McAllister, 2002). They responded with "no" or "yes". In accordance with the study by Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković (2009) that different types of victimhood would give different predictions for the reconciliation process, we decided to consider

two types of victimhood: (1) damage to family properties, referring to the loss of or damage to one's house, which was calculated in relation to the first question (M = 1.67, SD = 0.47); and (2) severe victimhood (referring to personal losses and threats to one's own life or to the lives of significant others), which was calculated by reference to the second two questions (the correlation between them is 0.41 and M = 1.64, SD = 0.48). Two indexes were created: one for damage to family properties (where score 1 indicates that participants declared that their house had not been damaged or destroyed during the war, and score 2 indicates that it had been damaged); and another for severe victimhood (score 1 indicates that participants have suffered neither of these severe victimhood scenarios, whereas score 2 indicates that they have suffered at least one). In order to check whether there were any significant differences in this variable an ANOVA was performed using age (dichotomized), gender, ethnic origin (Croats versus Serbs), and educational context (university versus secondary schools) as independent variables. We found significant differences regarding ethnic origin for the two indexes of victimhood (for family properties damage $F(1, 253)$ = 17.60, p <.001; and for severe victimhood $F(1, 253)$ = 10.53, p <.001). Estimates of damage to family properties and severe victimhood was higher among Croatian youth in Vukovar (respectively M = 1.76; SD = 0.43 and M = 1.73; SD = 0.45) than for Serb youth (respectively M = 1.51; SD = 0.50 and M = 1.53; SD = 0.50).

Ethnic origin

Participants were requested to indicate the extent to which they felt Croat or Serb, by positioning themselves on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). The scores were then split up and a dichotomized variable was created, having at level 1 those who identified themselves as being more Croat than Serb, and at level 2 those who identified themselves as being more Serb than Croat.

Propensity toward reconciliation

Two aspects of propensity towards reconciliation were measured: (a) emotive reactions and feelings towards youth from the other ethnic group; and (b) willingness to accept social relationships with youth belonging to the other ethnic group. First, we asked participants to indicate on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all; 7 = completely) how they feel in social interactions with youth from the other community (e.g., aggressive,

nervous, etc.). An index was calculated by summing responses, with higher results indicating more negative feelings ($\alpha = 0.80$; $M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.49$; min = 1; max = 7). Second, we asked respondents to indicate on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all; 7 = completely) the level to which they could accept youth belonging to the other community as 'classmates at school', 'colleagues in the workplace', 'neighbours', 'close friends', 'wife/husband'. We calculated an index of social acceptance of members of the other group by summing responses ($\alpha = 0.94$), with higher scores indicating greater social acceptance. The average scores relating to social acceptance of youth belonging to the other community was 3.87 ($SD = 1.74$, min = 1; max = 7). Correlation between these two indexes is 0.33.

3. Findings on relationship between parental communication and propensity towards reconciliation

In order to test our hypotheses, we performed four analyses of variance (ANOVA). In the first analysis, parental communication (verbal aggressiveness versus positive communication), victimhood – damage to family properties (absence versus presence), and ethnic origin (Croats versus Serbs) were considered as between factors 2x2x2 (Pantaleo, 2012). We considered negative emotions toward the out-group as a dependent variable.

As hypothesized, young people who live in families with constructive communication and low verbal aggressiveness had less negative emotions towards youth from the out-group (M = 3.13, SD = 1.38 vs. M = 4.18, SD = 1.42), F(1,222) = 24.84, p < .001) than young people who lived in families characterized by verbal aggressiveness. Moreover, experiencing victimhood in the form of damage to family properties during the war in Vukovar was predictive of more negative emotions toward the out-group (M = 3.74, SD = 1.53 versus M = 3.41, SD = 1.39), F(1,222) = 3.53, p = .06, marginally significant). In addition, there was significant interaction between perceived parental communication and ethnic origin (F(1, 222 = 5.03, p <.03). In order to better understand this interaction, we performed a simple effect analysis (Sidak) on each group (see Figure 1). The only significant effect was the difference between constructive versus aggressive relational style in the Croatian group, indicating that when parental communication was perceived as constructive (low verbal aggressiveness), young people had less negative emotions towards youth

of Serb origin than in cases of aggressive parental communication (M = 3.1, SD = 0.21 versus M = 4.3, SD = 0.17).

Fig. 1: Two-way interaction of negative emotions toward the other ethnic group among young people in Vukovar in ethnic origin and parental communication styles (arrows highlight pairwise significance)
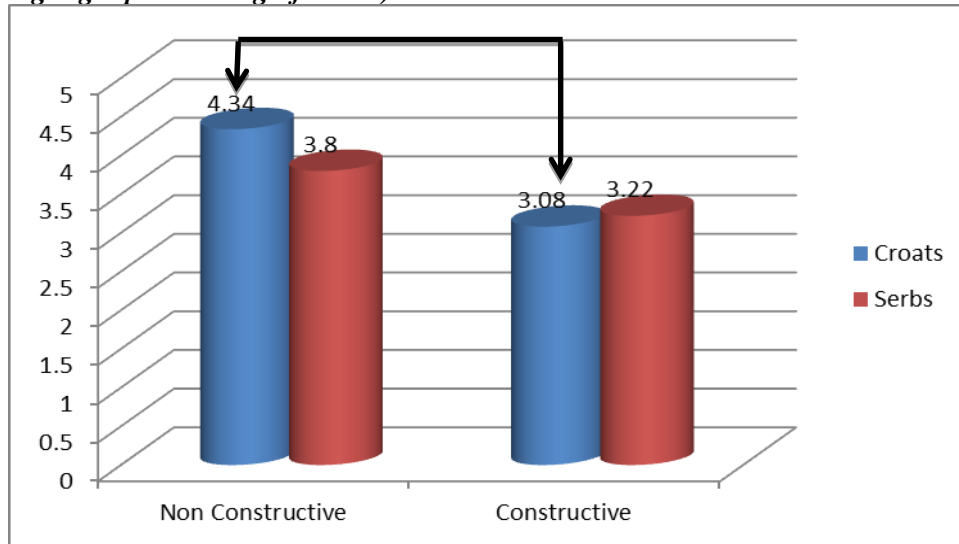

A second ANOVA was performed to test the hypothesis that perceived parental communication (constructive communication versus verbal aggressiveness), damage to family property, and ethnic origin, might affect a behavioural dimension, such as a child's willingness to accept a relationship with youth from the other ethnic group as a second dimension of the propensity toward reconciliation. Again, we found that there were significant principal effects of parental communication: young people who perceive their parents as using constructive communication within the family (low verbal aggressiveness) were more willing to accept relationships with young people belonging to the other ethnic group (M = 4.21, SD = 1.68) than those whose parents used aggressive communication (M = 3.19, SD = 1.52), F(1,222) = 20.38, p < .001). We also found that ethnic origin had an effect, with Croats less willing to accept relationships with Serbs (M = 3.35, SD = 1.63) than vice versa (M = 4.42, SD = 1.54), F(1,222) = 11.15, p < .001). In addition, we found a significant two-way interaction between ethnic origin and damages to family property (F(1,222) = 21.45, p < .001) and we tested mean differences (see Figure 2). In this case, all pairwise comparisons were significant, except the differences between Serbs and Croats who did not experience damage to family property.

Fig. 2: Two-way interaction of out-group acceptance towards the other ethnic group as a function of ethnic origin and the presence of damage to family property (all pairwise comparisons were pairwise significant except for differences between Serbs and Croats in the absence of damage to family properties)
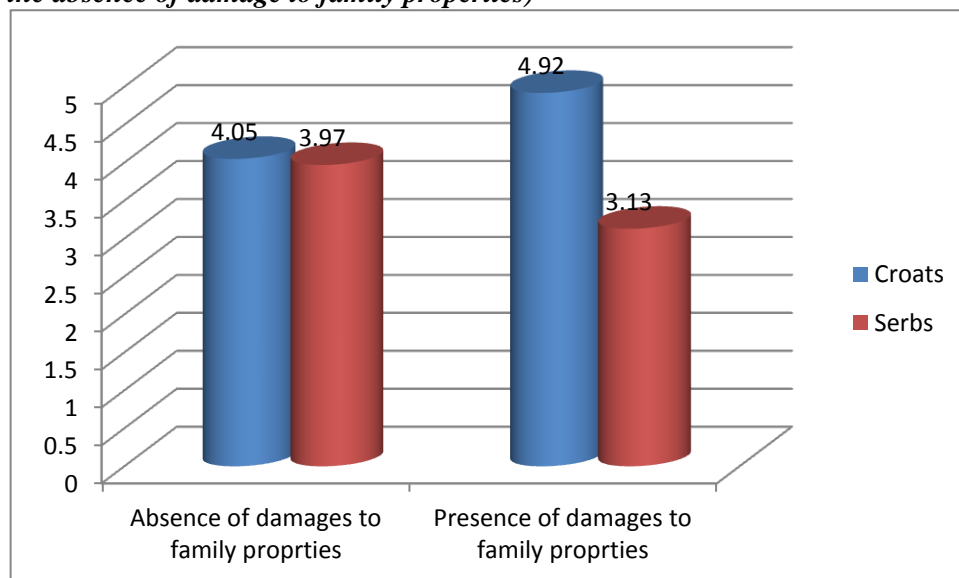

In a third ANOVA, we used the second index of victimhood: severe victimhood (absence versus presence of personal loss and threats to one's own life or the life of significant others during the war). The other two factors remained the same (perceived parental communication and ethnic origin). Here again, the dimension of negative emotions towards young people in the out-group was considered as a dependent variable. As in the previous study, parental communication had a significant effect (M = 3.13, SD = 1.38 vs. M = 4.18, SD = 1.42), F(1,222) = 15.19, p < .001). Severe victimhood also had a significant effect, demonstrating that the youth who had experienced severe victimhood had more negative emotions towards youth belonging to the other ethnic group (M = 3.89, SD = 1.55 vs. M = 3.16, SD = 1.25), F(1,222) = 10.46, p < .001). More interestingly, a triple interaction was found (F(1,222) = 4.06, p < .05) (see Figure 3). In this case, for Croats, constructive parental communication (low verbal aggressiveness) reduced negative emotions, even in the presence of severe victimhood. By contrast, for Serbs, constructive parental communication (low verbal aggressiveness) only reduced negative emotions if the child had not experienced severe victimhood.

Fig. 3: Three-way interaction of negative emotion towards the other ethnic group with victimhood, ethnic origin and styles of parental communication
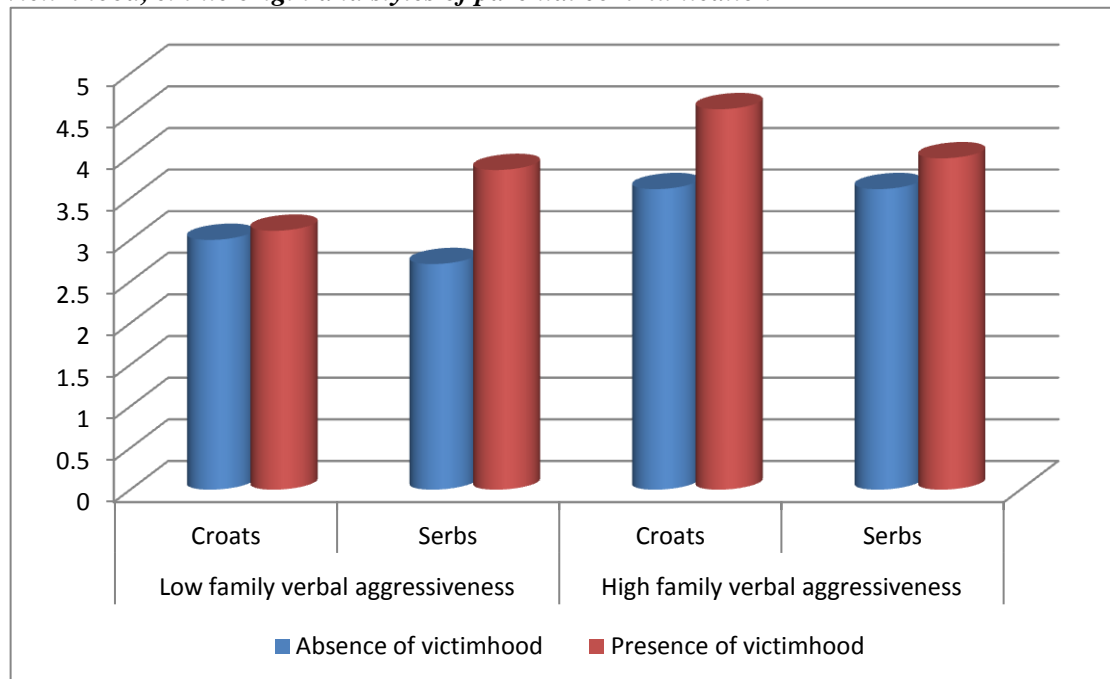
In a fourth ANOVA, willingness to accept relationships with youth from the other ethnic group was considered as a dependent variable. Independent factors remained the same as in the third ANOVA. Results showed, as in all previous analyses, that young people who lived in families that were oriented towards constructive relational communication (which were not verbally aggressive) were more willing to accept relationships with youth belonging to the other ethnic group (M = 4.21, SD = 1.68 vs. M = 3.19, SD = 1.52), $F(1,222) = 13.33$, $p < .001$). Moreover, as in the previous analysis, an effect was identified in relation to ethnicity, with Croats less willing to accept relationships with Serbs (M = 3.35, SD = 1.63 vs. M = 4.42, SD = 1.54), $F(1,222) = 16.88$, $p < .001$). Interestingly, we found a significant two-way interaction between parental communication and severe victimhood ($F(1,222) = 4.46$, $p < .05$). In this case, pairwise comparisons indicated that young people who had experienced severe victimhood were less willing to accept relationships with youth from the other ethnic group, especially when their parents used aggressive communication styles within the family.

Fig. 4: Two-way interaction of acceptance as a function of victimhood and parental communication styles (arrows highlight pairwise significance)
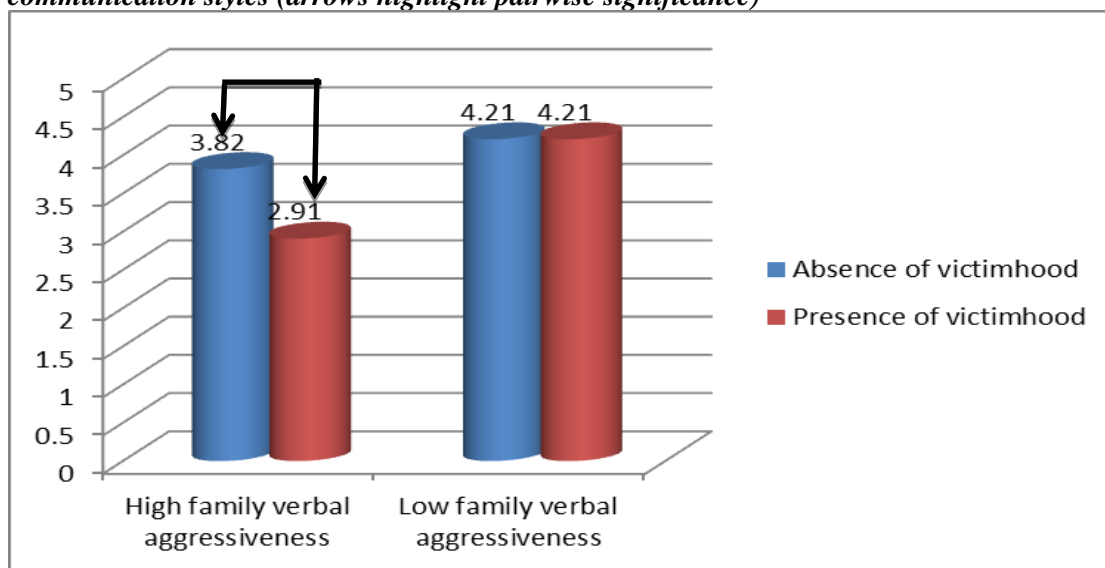
Although parental communication was shown to moderate the relationship between victimhood and a propensity towards reconciliation – i.e., the level of negative emotion towards the out-group and the willingness to accept social relationships with youth belonging to the other ethnic group – questions remained as to whether parental communication could affect adolescents' communication and conflict management styles, and whether behaviour by the father and the mother contributed equally to this hypothesized effect. In order to answer these questions, a regression analysis was performed, using as a predictor perceived parental relational styles and the criteria of adolescent styles of conflict management. Results showed that perceived parental communication styles significantly affected adolescent conflict management styles (Adj R = .11, F = 17.05, p < .001).

4. Discussion

This study examined the relationships between the perception of victimhood among young people in Vukovar and their propensity towards reconciliation with the other community. We found that a sense of victimhood – referring to damage to family property and to personal losses and threats to one's own life or to the lives of significant others – is associated with negative emotions towards youth belonging to the out-group and less propensity towards reconciliation.

Moreover, the study examined the relationship between perceived parental communication and propensity towards reconciliation. Results confirmed that perceived parental constructive and non-aggressive communication was a positive predictor of the child's willingness to accept social contacts with youth from the other ethnic group and of less negative emotions towards them. Interestingly, the results indicated that young people who perceived their parents using constructive communication within the family (versus those who were verbally aggressive) seemed to have a greater propensity towards reconciliation, even if they experienced a high sense of victimhood. These results suggest that perceived parental communication might reduce the negative consequences of the conflict: even those young peoples who see themselves and their family as victims of the war expressed a higher level of propensity towards reconciliation with the other ethnic group if their parents used positive and non-aggressive styles of communication within the family than those who saw themselves and their family as victims of the war, but whose parents used aggressive communication within the family.

Furthermore, perceived parental communication was found to correlate positively with adolescent styles of conflict management, confirming that young people learn communication styles, social interaction skills, and ways to manage and overcome interpersonal conflicts from their parents. This fact can also be applied to external contexts. We believe that young people who learn verbal (and non-verbal) constructive and non-aggressive conflict management styles within their families feel more confident and competent in social interactions, even when these are conflictual. They might use constructive conflict management communication skills to discuss, to argue, to deal with negative emotions, and to search for a compromise. In addition, they may show more patience in listening to others, and feel more efficient and assertive in arguing with others. We suppose that this communication style may be more acceptable to interlocutors and may allow more space for dialogue.

According to socio-psychological theories, restoration and rebuilding of relationships is fundamental to the reconciliation process. All our social interactions and contacts depend on the quality of communication, not only on the content but also on the styles of communication and on communication skills. The anxiety and uncertainty management theory of effective communication (Gudykunst, 2005) assumes that the perception of effectiveness in communication with others reduces anxiety and eases communication. We may suppose that young people who grow up

with verbally aggressive parents may have low confidence in their communication skills and may thus avoid contact with others, especially those belonging to an adversarial community. We argue that people in post-conflict areas become emotionally aroused when they encounter an out-group member. Their perceptions decrease their willingness for dialogue with the other side and fuel an endless cycle of negative emotions, and sometimes aggressive reactions. However, young people who experience their parents using constructive and non-aggressive communication within the family may be more likely employ constructive responses in their interactions with members of an out-group, even if this is an adversarial one.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of the results obtained, we can conclude that parental communication styles are important resources for psychological resilience and for improving relationships among young people in post-conflict contexts. It is important to develop awareness about our styles of communication and about the effects these may have on those with whom we interact and on our social relations. Unfortunately, unconstructive communication and verbal aggression are widespread in different contexts, including in interactions with parents, partners, supervisors, colleagues, and children. Examples of destructive communication behaviour are often described in magazines, newspapers, on radio and television. People are passionate and impulsive in their arguments, which may lead to feelings of anger, hurt, embarrassment or humiliation. Even the family context is not immune from aggressive communication and conflict.

There are many cultural and social conditions that can affect family communication. One of these is difficult life conditions, such as poverty and discrimination. Tired or frustrated parents may also be more likely to use verbal aggression and violence in an effort to suppress a child's aggressive or other unwanted behaviour, rather than teaching them alternative ways of communicating or responding to their legitimate needs. Unfortunately, in the post-war economy of the area of Vukovar, a high percentage of the population is out of work, with little promise of economic improvement in the coming years. Virtually all industry in the region was destroyed during the conflict, and it has not been rebuilt. In addition, almost everyone in Vukovar has experienced psychological consequences from the war and the post-war period (among the most traumatized are soldiers, refugees,

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people who lost a loved one, people who stayed in Vukovar during the three-month siege); despite this, very little has been done to assist people in healing their emotional wounds. Reasons for this might be found in the cultural context, but also in the lack of financial and professional resources (Kosić and Tauber, 2010). Yet the healing of the emotional wounds is a prerequisite to personal well-being, to healthy and effective communication, including within families, and to reconciliation with others.

A number of community projects have been undertaken in recent years to promote intergroup dialogue among young people in Vukovar[1] (see Kosić and Byrne, 2009; Kosić and Tauber, 2010). The enormous efforts which individuals and organizations have put into these projects should be recognized and applauded. However, only a limited number of projects address the issues of communication and conflict management.[2] This study suggests that greater attention should be paid to the issues raised in this article through seminars and working groups on non-violent communication organized in schools and, if possible, with parents. It is important to raise awareness among people that aggressive communication is not desirable and that other, more constructive communication skills can be learnt and used to better effect. Priests and church ministers, who potentially have a lot of influence, could make a significant contribution towards promoting the importance of non-violent communication; however, to date they have shown little propensity towards helping to advance intercommunity dialogue.

The literature suggests that some psychologists have developed training programmes on styles of conflict management in their work with parents and adolescents. Robin (1985) has developed an intervention programme for parents and adolescents who experience high levels of conflict. The programme teaches the parties to acknowledge both sides of an issue, to use creativity when brainstorming for solutions, and to use positive communication and problem-solving skills to reach a solution. The programme has been shown to be effective in reducing rates of parental–adolescent conflict relative to a no-treatment control group (Robin *et al.*, 1977) and in comparison to other treatment strategies (e.g. systems and psychodynamic therapies) (Robin, 1981). Although it is not easy to change styles of communication within families, schools and teachers could have a more active role in teaching children constructive styles of communication. They could also serve as role models for crossing ethnic boundaries (Aboud and Levy, 2000; Čorkalo Biruški and

Ajduković, 2012); this might be easier if schools progressed to a more integrated system. Last but not least, it is of utmost importance to promote reconciliation and forgiveness within families, and to provide psychological counselling to those who are traumatized.

This study has some limits. It was based on adolescent perceptions rather than questions to parents or observations of real family situations. We are aware that perceptions of relationships and actual parent–child relationships will not be the same in many cases. However, the influence of perception on human behaviour is sometimes greater than the influence of reality itself. In addition, the causality of relations between parental communication and the propensity towards reconciliation remains unclear and should be investigated further. In addition, although we believe that the classes selected were representative of young people of the same age group in Vukovar, we do not claim that they are representative of the wider population of Croatia or of other post-conflict areas. Lastly, by saying that family communication and conflict management styles may influence the propensity towards reconciliation, intergroup attitudes, and relations between young people, we do not deny the importance of cultural and societal factors for these relationships. We are aware that social reconstruction in a post-conflict context is a complex social and political process that should operate at the individual, interpersonal and intergroup levels, and finally at the level of the society itself (Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković, 2009).

Notes

1. For example, 'Run without Frontiers', supported by the Europe House Vukovar; 'Stronger Together', supported by the PRONI Centre for Social Education; 'Vukovar Together for High School Students in Vukovar', supported by the Vukovar Institute for Peace Research and Education; 'Education and Human Rights', promoted by the Centre for Peace, Human Rights and Non-Violence established by Adam Curle and Katerina Kruhonja.
2. For example, 'I say no to violence' supported by the Europe House Vukovar; 'Education and Human Rights' promoted by the Centre for Peace, Human Rights and Non-Violence; 'Conflict Transformation' supported by the Coalition for Work with Psychotrauma and Peace – CWWPP; 'Summer educational work camp 'Vurbanica' promoted by the Youth Peace Group Danube; and 'Development of social competence among children' and 'Together against violence' promoted by the Vukovar Institute for Peace Education and Research – VIMIO.

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