

Responsibility and Peace Activism: Lessons from the Balkans^{*}

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Abstract

Background: The notion of responsibility for peace in this article is examined through the analysis of stories told by seven peace activists that have chosen to promote peace in the midst of the violent 1990s conflicts in the Balkans by resisting or rejecting violence. **Purpose:** This study aims to explore what it means to perform responsible action (i.e. why certain individuals choose peace in the midst of conflict, despite danger and risk for themselves), and what makes their peace activities successful. **Methodology:** The research is based on seven in-depth semi-structured interviews. By means of dynamical systems theory and Levinas' concept of responsibility, this study traces the positive attractor dynamics within individual narratives of these peace activists, which includes actions or thinking that produce peaceful outcomes in conflict systems. **Findings:** The findings suggest that inquiry and openness towards the Other rooted in care and responsibility can serve as a positive attractor in a conflict system. Successful peace activities are enabled through learning from past mistakes and creation of inclusive and diverse spaces for interaction in which historical narratives can be expanded and non-violent strategies can be embraced. **Originality/value:** This study contributes to the body of knowledge on how change leading to peaceful outcomes can be introduced in conflict systems through peace activism and how we can deal with the current and future violent conflicts more constructively. It also helps to bridge the gap between practice of and research on conflict resolution by giving voice to the practitioners and eliciting lessons from the ground.

Keywords: Responsibility, peace activism, non-violence, conflict, dynamical systems, Balkans, Levinas.

1 Introduction

As an alternative to interventionism and militarism implemented in conflict situations around the world that fail to address the roots of conflicts, building human potential to choose peace and foster the capacity to perform autonomous

* I would like to dedicate this paper to my mother, Nada Manojlovic, who was my best friend and critic, and who made all my achievements possible.

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action despite constraining circumstances should contribute to a shift in approaching conflicts. It is important to stress that we cannot understand and explain conflicts if we focus only on people's potential to do evil, to be aggressive and violent (Baumeister and Beck, 1999; Bernstein, 2002; Megargee and Hokanson, 1970; Niehoff, 1999); we cannot understand it by only searching for causes of conflict in human innate competitiveness (Elliott and Kiel, 2002), historical traumas (Antze and Lambek, 1996; Brouneus, 2010; Goboda-Madikizeal, 2008; Volkan, 1998), economic disparities (Ballentine and Sherman, 2003; Collier, 2007) and ancient grievances (Berdal and Malone, 2000; Gagnon, 2004; Majstorovic, 1997). We cannot even start to comprehend the logic of extreme violence if we do not have counter-examples of people or groups who decided to reject or interrupt it. The aim of this study is to look for sources of human capacity and potential to choose peace despite the violent setting or legacy by analysing real-life cases at the individual level.

The study will entail analysis of the existing literature and interviews with seven peace activists from the Balkans utilizing the dynamical systems theory (DST) lens and Levinas' concept of responsibility.¹ Acting for peace and rejecting violence is a deeply individual act; it suggests choice, which is an expression of freedom and an opening for a new set of relationships. Such a choice implies a particular view of responsibility that needs to be further examined theoretically, so that it can be used to inform practice. This study aims to illuminate factors that contribute to peaceful outcomes in conflict situations by analysing stories of the peace activists from the Balkans. Findings based on this analysis will contribute to the body of knowledge on how positive change can be introduced in conflict systems through peace activism and how we can deal with the current and future violent conflicts more constructively. By giving voice to the practitioners and gaining insight into their local knowledge that could inform further research and theory building, this study helps to bridge the gap between practice and research in the field of conflict analysis and resolution.

2 Literature Review

The idea that peace must be about a constructive collaboration and relationship between former belligerents (Curle, 1990; 1995) leads us to the concept of responsibility as a relational category, which will be used in this study as the key concept for illuminating why people choose peace in the most constraining circumstances of conflict. Responsibility, in this sense, is very close to Levinas'

- 1 The dynamical systems theory is used to analyse the cases of positive attractor dynamics in individual peace activists who tend to behave in a consistent manner (e.g. promoting peace and non-violent change) despite interpersonal and situational forces that militate against such behaviour or promote other types of behaviour (see Methodology section for more details). Levinas' view of responsibility provides an additional lens for analysis of sources of human capacity and potential to choose peace despite the violent setting. Responsibility for the Other is essential for the Self, and it stems from care and love of the Others, who are extensions of the Self. Humans cannot become fully human on their own, but rather through relationships with each other (see Literature Review section for more details).

(1987) concept of responsibility that emphasizes relationality, care and connectiveness to the Other.

It can be argued that there are two sources of responsibility, external and internal. The external is imposed from the outside through laws, traditions, rules and regulations. It suggests causality and linking an agent to an outcome of his/her action (Bivins, 2006; Honoré, 2010). Such a view of responsibility is based on the notion of reciprocity of moral rights that all individuals have towards each other (Christman, 1991; Singer and Singer, 1997). It suggests that people are held responsible for their choices and actions by other individuals through a set of rules within different structures in which causes and effects of particular action can be established. The focus of this article, however, is on the internal source of responsibility. Responsibility is seen as an expression of care for both the Other and the Self, which should not be seen as a duty coming from divine, juridical or other outside sources, but as a necessity of the Self for being with the Other and empathizing with the Other's distress, acknowledging and caring for her/his pain and offering a hand.

Such responsibility offers an alternative perspective that suggests shifting from both individual or structure-centred ontologies to a relational one (Gergen, 2011; Picard and Melchin, 2007). Relationship-centred ontology suggests a human condition in which individuals and groups begin to appreciate the fact that their relationships with the Others have constitutive and existential value for them (Whiteley, 1987). Human beings cannot exist in isolation; it is the Other, often the *Enemy*, that we need to share our land and lives with. It is not a matter of choice, but the way of being.

According to Emmanuel Levinas (1987), we can uncover our ethics and values through the relationship with the Other. In other words, our potential of becoming better human beings is through opening up to the others, accepting the difference of the Other and her or his infinite Otherness that cannot be reduced to our horizons of knowing. By stressing relationality, Levinas (1987) departs from the liberal idea of a self-sufficient individual pursuing his or her self-interest as the natural human condition. The interdependence of the Self and the Other is key for the constitution of an individual, and, moreover, humans cannot become fully human on their own, but relationally. To act responsibly means to act respectfully towards the Other; to act responsibly means to learn and explore why the Other or others sometimes do not positively reciprocate our actions. The Other cannot be reduced to objective knowledge – the other is a mystery that is revealed through the relationship that suggests openness to learning and self-correction.

Let us now consider self-correction as an important DST concept applied in this article. Self-correction implies the existence of processes in the system that can be mobilized to address the failures and establish equilibrium. Self-correction is not possible if the system cannot react to and embrace the voices and needs of those excluded, and we cannot find a way out of a conflict situation if we are not able to self-correct (Coleman, 2011). This is extremely difficult in the conflict systems, which are closed, non-interactive and biased. These systems do not allow questioning, dissent and inquiry. They require consensus on the correctness of a single story. It is usually Us who are correct, good and victimized, while the Oth-

ers are wrong, bad and aggressive. Conflict systems can, therefore, be seen as extreme, self-righteous, exclusionary, binary and autistic. They are based on competition and aggression towards the Others who are placed outside the moral and political order, and therefore violence against them is justified as a necessity for in group's survival. Such systems are almost incapable of self-correction unless humans develop intentional responses that can destabilize them.

Exclusionary approach towards peace activists (e.g. labeling them as anti-patriotic, traitors and dissidents) and their demands "reduced the opportunity for balance and self-correction within the system" (Coleman, 2011: 3103-3104). Such stigmatization served to subdue alternative voices that demanded cessation of violence during the war, which created a potential for escalation of violence. Conflict systems tolerate correctness of only one story based on an 'us versus them' dichotomy, and are hostile to the voices that challenge uniform contentious behaviour. Levinas (1980) similarly points out that the attempts to decrease differences and promote consensus are exclusionary and require some type of violence.

Another important concept that both Levinas and Coleman stress is openness to learning and inquiry about the Other, which does not imply reduction of our differences, but their acceptance. According to Coleman, "creativity and openness to exploration are essential to constructive solutions" (Coleman, 2011: 343). By expanding ourselves through others, we are creating a relational space where everyone can experience peace, which implies open and liberating relationships. It has been the role of peace activists to function as catalysts in destabilizing the closed and non-adaptive conflict systems by opening channels of communication, meetings and dialogue with the Other. Only by finding ways to open up towards the Other and learning about his or her needs and grievances can we create conditions for societies to restore their adaptive functions which can counteract conflict (Coleman, 2011: 3203-3204). By reducing the Other to being an Enemy, we are limiting ourselves to fewer options of engagement with the Other, one of which may be considering the Other as a potential ally with whom we could engage in a process of conflict resolution (Levinas, 1987). The peace activists' reaching out to the opposite side and breaking the limitations pertaining to engagement is a clear example of this.

This study also seeks insights into what made the initiatives of the peace activists in the Balkans successful. As we learn through empirical data, change generated through non-violent means leads to a more sustainable peace (Anderson, 2012; Chenoweth, 2013; Nagler, 2001). We can argue that non-violent action in many conflict situations is a more responsible and better option than violent action, but, at the same time, we need to be aware of the limitations and non-applicability of non-violent strategies, particularly in situations of escalated conflict. It cannot be disputed, though, that peace can emerge only when the actors regain their capacity to act attentively, intelligently and responsibly; when there are individuals and groups who are able to make responsible decisions in the most volatile situations. This is evident in the responsible choices of visionary leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. to adopt non-violent ways in their struggle for freedom and change of status quo. Such

choices are not a prerogative of leaders alone. They are the choices that an individual, a group or a society makes by adapting to the new situation, learning from the past experiences and self-correcting. A true sustainable peace comes about when anyone in the system is able to imagine a way to create discontinuity in the vicious cycles of revenge and violence.

The puzzle that remains to be explored further thus comprises the two research questions of this article: (1) *why certain individuals choose peace in the midst of conflict, despite danger and risk for themselves*, and (2) *what makes their peace activities successful?* By integrating Levinas' and the DST perspective, this study aims to contribute to the literature by answering this puzzle. This will be done by using the Balkans case study described in the following section.

3 Case Study

The case study focuses on peace activism in Serbia and Croatia during and after the 1990s wars in former Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia's disintegration took a bloody turn as the representatives of the six Yugoslav republics were unable to agree on the future of the state. The series of conflicts in Yugoslavia started with the Slovenian short confrontation in 1991, followed by wars in Croatia and Bosnia and ending with the war in Kosovo 1999. Croatian and Serbian nationalist elites had very different concepts about the ideal states for their nations that came to the forefront as Yugoslavia weakened. Those concepts clashed most notably in President Tudman's discourse of a "one-thousand-year long dream" of independent Croatia as well as President Milošević's claim that "all Serbs should live in one state".

Inability to reach an agreement on the future of Yugoslavia-led Croatia and Slovenia to seek greater autonomy within Yugoslavia later transformed into requests for confederal status and independence. Early recognition of Croatia and Slovenia by Germany without reaching a political solution precipitated violence that led to bloody, fratricidal wars that are often described as Europe's deadliest conflicts since World War II – the war in Croatia lasted from 1991 to 1995, and it involved Croat forces loyal to the government of Croatia and the Serb-controlled Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and local Serb forces in Croatia; the Bosnian war lasted from 1992 to 1995, and it involved the forces of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and those of the Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat entities within Bosnia and Herzegovina backed by Serbia and Croatia, respectively; the Kosovo war lasted from 1998 to 1999, and it was fought by the forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Kosovo Albanian rebel group, known as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), supported by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). These conflicts ravaged the country and its peoples, resulting in an estimated 140,000 and more than 4 million displaced.² They became infamous for the war crimes committed, including mass murder and genocide.

2 See <<http://ictj.org/publication/transitional-justice-former-yugoslavia>>.

In Serbia, the case study focuses on the peace activists belonging to Canvas,³ an organization founded in 2004 by a few members of the Otpor ('Resistance') movement, and Women in Black,⁴ which was formed in 1991. Otpor was created to resist the regime's repression of the universities after a University Law of late May 1998 restricted the Belgrade University's autonomy and free expression.⁵ Otpor was initiated when a group of students from Belgrade University decided that they needed to do something about changing the unbearable inertia and apathy in Serbia, a country engulfed in a decade of wars, economic crisis and sociocultural degradation under President Milosevic's regime. Only two years later, Otpor had 70,000 supporters, and Milosevic was driven out of office after massive demonstrations and acts of disobedience inspired and led by Otpor members (Sorensen, 2008). Milosevic lost in the 2000 elections, and the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), the broad reform coalition, came to power restoring democracy. During and after the decade of wars in former Yugoslavia, the Women in Black group opposed the war and demanded responsibility for war crimes (Duhacek, 2006). Women in Black in Serbia continue to demonstrate in public spaces and voice their demands for peace and justice.

In Croatia, the peace activism started in the midst of war in the 1990s. The case study focuses on peace activists from the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights,⁶ founded in 1992, and from the PRONI Center for Social Education,⁷ founded in 1998 in Osijek. The Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights was established by five people who knew that although they could not influence the course of the war, they must continue to publicly demonstrate their choice for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. They actively protested against the war, held vigils to protect citizens of different nationalities and sought justice for the victims. Members of the PRONI Center for Social Education have focused on

- 3 The Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) is a non-profit, non-governmental, educational institution that promotes non-violent strategies around the world. It was founded by Srđa Popović and Slobodan Đinović, who were both former members of the Serbian youth resistance movement Otpor. They hold lectures, workshops, trainings and courses educating pro-democracy activists around the world about the principles for success in non-violent struggle. See <www.canvasopedia.org>.
- 4 Women in Black was inspired by earlier movements of women who demonstrated on the streets, making a public space for women to be heard – particularly Black Sash, in South Africa, and the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, seeking the 'disappeared' in the political repression in Argentina. During the sequence of wars that began in 1992, in Croatia and Bosnia, Women in Black groups sprang up in many more countries, supporting Zene u Crnom Belgrade in their opposition to war. See <<http://zeneucnom.org/index.php?lang=en>>.
- 5 See <www.nonviolent-conflict.org/index.php/movements-and-campaigns/movements-and-campaigns-summaries?sobi2Task=sobi2Details&sobi2Id=16>.
- 6 Centre for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights is a civil association that focuses on peace building, protection and promotion of human rights and freedoms, and the promotion of creative methods of conflict resolution at the individual, group and political level. See <www.centarza-mir.hr/en/>.
- 7 PRONI Center for Social Education is striving to encourage cooperation and understanding between people. PRONI Center wants to enable young people to take responsibilities for themselves and for the development of the society they are part of, in which their needs are recognized and responded to at all levels. See <www.proni.hr/index.php/en/>.

young people, civil society organizations and responsible authorities using an integrated developmental approach in the fields of education, youth work and policy development. Many of their members were peace activists during the war, facilitating interethnic dialogue and cross-border meetings.

4 Methodology

The notion of responsibility for peace in this article is examined through the analysis of stories told by the individuals who have intentionally chosen peace by resisting or rejecting violence. Additionally, the author has conducted a review of numerous journal, articles, books and online sources on the topic of responsibility and peaceful practices. Seven in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the peace activists from the Balkans.⁸ Specifically, the activists⁹ that are currently members of the above four organizations have all been engaged in peace movements and non-violent actions during and after the 1990s conflicts in former Yugoslavia. The interviews were conducted in 2013 in person, via phone and Skype. The interviewees were accessed through a network of acquaintances in civil society and academia working on peace and reconciliation projects in the Balkans. They were recorded, transcribed and translated by the author.

Dynamical systems lens was used to analyse interview transcripts to elicit the key lessons learned of what it means to perform responsible action in conflict, connecting it with the conceptual debates on the topic of responsibility for peace at large. Although stemming from physics and mathematics, dynamical models and principles have been used to date to explain and predict a wide range of social processes, changes and behaviours in conflict situations (Bartoli *et al.*, 2010; Coleman, 2011). The dynamical systems perspective provides tools, such as positive attractors, for analysing how transformation of the system from “the coordinated ensemble of dynamics perpetuating the conflict to a different coherent state that allows for benign (or positive) relations between the parties” occurs (Boyatzis and Howard, 2006; Vallacher *et al.*, 2010). By identifying the cases of departure from common patterns of violent and conflict behaviours leading to peaceful outcomes

- 8 Some of the main interview questions were:
- 1 Tell us about your work as a peace activist. What are the lessons learned and challenges that you encountered?
 - 2 What is your responsibility as a peace activist?
 - 3 Why did you choose to act for peace in the midst of conflict despite all the constraints?
 - 4 Does it have to do with your sense of responsibility?
 - 5 What is responsibility for peace?
 - 6 How do we support others to take responsibility for peace?
- 9 Interviewed peace activists:
- Sanja Vukovic-Covic (PRONI Center for Social Education, Croatia)
 - Irena Mikulic (PRONI Center for Social Education, Croatia)
 - Diana Lupsic (PRONI Center for Social Education, Croatia)
 - Tatjana Škrbić (Center for Peace, Non-violence and Human Rights, Croatia)
 - Katarina Kruhonja (Center for Peace, Non-violence and Human Rights, Croatia)
 - Milan Raskovic (Canvas-Otpor, Serbia)
 - Gordana Subotic (Women in Black, Serbia)

in conflict situations, we can trace positive attractor behaviours. According to Vallacher *et al.*, an attractor represents “a narrow range of mental states and actions that is experienced by a person or group” (2010: 265) in a particular setting. Positive attractors in a certain societal system result in actions or thinking that induce change towards peace, while negative attractors pull the system towards conflict. This study explores positive attractors in individual peace activists who tend to behave in a consistent manner (*e.g.* promoting peace and non-violent change, helping victims, speaking out against injustice in their communities) despite interpersonal and situational forces that militate against such behaviour or promote other types of behaviour. Thus, the study traces positive attractor behaviour within individual narratives of the interviewees such as propensity to self-correction, inquiry about the Other (Coleman *et al.*, 2007; Coleman, 2006) and the responsibility to care for the Other as an extension of Self (Levinas, 1987). It does so by looking into the structure of respondents’ narratives. To help identify common patterns around the overarching concepts of self-correction, inquiry and responsibility to care, data was classified into categories. Such categories included inclusive space, transformation, learning, contention, non-violent initiatives and care, which were compared across respondents and visually displayed through concept mapping (Zhang, 2014). By connecting Levinas’ responsibility to care for the Other and DST concepts of self-correction and open inquiry about the Other, an additional insight into the sources of peace activists’ choices was enabled.

5 Findings

In this section I address the two research questions, namely (1) why certain individuals choose peace in the midst of conflict, despite danger and risk for themselves and (2) what makes their peace activities successful. As for the first research question, I found that (a) inquiry and openness towards the Other rooted in care and responsibility can serve as a positive attractor in a conflict system. As for the second question, I found that (b) by creating inclusive and diverse spaces for interaction, historical narratives can be expanded and innovative strategies can emerge and that (c) non-violent initiatives and learning from past mistakes are a key tool for transforming contentious dynamics.

5.a *Inquiry and Openness towards the Other Rooted in Care and Responsibility as a Positive Attractor*

In Croatia, a peace activist and a founding member of the Center for Peace, Katarina Kruhonja in Osijek, is a good example of how a single person can play a significant role in changing contentious patterns of interaction through inquiry about the Other and taking responsibility for peace. She was one of the initiators of the peace movement in the midst of conflict of the 1990s in Osijek, Croatia. The movement began to grow into a group, independent of, but affiliated with the Anti-War Campaign, calling itself the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights, which later became a non-governmental organization. As a medical doc-

tor, Katarina saw the wounded and killed brought to her hospital, and she could not sit still. She started to inquire: "I started asking questions and talking to my colleagues and friends about how we can change the unbearable situation and stop the violence."¹⁰ A small group of friends grew into a movement that conducted vigils to protect citizens of different nationalities from being killed, and organized encounters of people from different sides of the conflict.

Katarina and her colleagues opted for peace and strived towards peace even while the war was still going on. Openness and inquiry about the Other counteracted ignorance and a one-sided picture of the Other. It led them to take a stand against violations of humanitarian law and human rights perpetrated by their own community. Katarina states: "We needed to know what is happening with people in our communities regardless of their nationality. Our goal was to help the needy ones, particularly the victims whose dignity had to be protected. We saw victims on all sides as very much part of solution and peace in the future."¹¹ Rejecting the patterns of conflict behaviour that rest on a clear delineation between Self and Other made it possible for those activists to embark on a journey of self-correction, inquiry and learning.

Peace cannot become reality if we do not have a space where nurturing thinking and talking of peace is made possible. In the Balkans, such space was largely provided by a nascent civil society, which did not exist in socialist Yugoslavia. As intercommunal patterns of behaviour started to cohere around differentiation, hatred and revenge pulling the whole system towards fratricidal war, the majority of people responded with paralysis and inertia. People suddenly became part of a conflict system in which peace was removed from the public discourse and the space for talking and nurturing peace shrank. As another peace activist from the Center for Peace in Osijek, Tanja Skrbic, said: "Peace has become an underground and dangerous idea discussed in secrecy, in families, among friends."¹² Still, by talking about peace, inquiring about the Other and self-correcting, peace activists were able to create safe spaces that enabled them to dream, imagine and eventually act on peace.

The stories of seven activists show that it is through the responsibility of acknowledging the existence of the Other and establishing a relationship with the Other that creativity and innovation of action comes about, action that is rooted in care. This kind of responsibility is generative, relational and inclusive. Diana Lupsic, from PRONI, argues: "Peace is responsibility of all of us. We cannot live disconnected from others."¹³ Katarina adds that peace should be developed on the basis of one's own capacities and not at the expense of others ... peace can only emerge when relationships of solidarity, cooperation and care are established.¹⁴ If we focus only on fulfilment of one's aspirations and claims without regard for the Other, this implies some kind of aggression and taking away some-

10 Skype interview with Katarina Kruhonja on 1 June 2013.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Skype interview with Tanja Skrbic on 28 May 2013.

13 Phone interview with Tanja Skrbic on 1 June 2013.

14 Skype interview with Katarina Kruhonja on 1 June 2013.

thing from the other, be it land, resources, political access or freedom. Although such action may lead to a victory, the consequences of victory over the Other are, more often than not, detrimental to both the Self and the Other in the long run. They leave a long trail of destruction, grievances and wrongs that tend to perpetuate conflict and feed further violence. The problem with such behaviour is in its inability to capture the wider picture; by excluding the Other it also excludes opportunities for the Self to fully actualize, grow and live a productive life in a truly peaceful society.

5.b Expanding Historical Narratives and Space for Inclusion and Diversity

Over time, certain patterns of interaction become common, accepted and internalized by people, serving as an attractor that enables coherent understanding and meanings that lead to certain action orientation (Vallacher *et al.*, 2010). Meanings and emotions attached to contentious history and its different versions often create negative attractors (Boyatzis and Howard, 2006) and are used to assert, maintain or challenge action and legitimacy of Self and Other. Discursive contention is often transmitted into the realm of relationships and interactions on the ground that are marked by tensions, divisions and stereotyping. Historical narratives in societies stricken by violent and protracted conflict are extremely emotionally loaded and based on an 'us versus them' dichotomy. In order to change contentious patterns of interaction, historical narratives would have to be expanded and self-corrected through open inquiry, dialogue and learning from past experiences. For that to happen, it is crucial to catalogue and reflect on how the change in approaching historical narratives leads to the change in the patterns of interactions that enabled transformational and peaceful attractor dynamics in conflict systems.

One of the peace activists from Serbia and a former member of Otpor, Milan Raskovic, points out that they were able to change contentious patterns of thinking about the Other among their own membership: "In the midst of tensions, we were open to learning and innovation – we were willing to listen to the ordinary people and our membership was multiethnic. It is through inclusion of other groups and diversity that the new ideas and strategies for our struggle were born."¹⁵ Gordana Subotic,¹⁶ from Women in Black, as well as Irena Mikulic,¹⁷ from PRONI, both add that voices of dissent are subdued and individuals are drawn towards more simplified, uniform narratives during conflict. However, even in the midst of conflict, it is possible to create spaces for peace to emerge. In such spaces the narrative widens, as people become more open, curious and ready to engage with the stories of others. In Croatia, an inclusive space in which narratives could be expanded was created by the peace activists from the PRONI Center and the Center for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights. They organized meetings with the people from different ethnic groups who did not see one other

15 In-person interview with Milan Raskovic on 23 May 2013 in Belgrade, Serbia.

16 In-person interview with Gordana Subotic on 22 May 2013 in Belgrade, Serbia.

17 In-person interview with Irena Mikulic and Sanja Vukovic-Colic on 27 May 2013 in Osijek, Croatia.

for years because of the war. Irena Mikulic and Sanja, from PRONI, recall: “Opening channels of communication was a first step towards peace. We saw immediate transformation in people’s attitudes, which made us think how to intensify these contacts.”¹⁸ By creating inclusive spaces that enabled interethnic interaction, contentious narratives of the past as a negative attractor that perpetuated divisions were thus challenged and peace activists were given an additional impetus to implement similar initiatives. A new community whose members were able to bond around principles of ethnic inclusion, interdependence and cooperation, rather than distrust of the Other, was created.

5.c *Non-Violence Is a Novelty That Changed Our Reality*

Although the examples of individuals and groups that organized around the ideas of non-violence and peaceful action in the Balkans do not feature prominently in the public space, media or education system, the ideas of non-violent action have proved to be a powerful incentive for social movements in Serbia and Croatia to gain traction and support in their societies. According to Gordana Subotic, a peace activist and a member of Women in Black: “It has been the insistence on truth, protest against war and non-violent resistance that paved the way for a more peaceful future. We learned a lot from Gandhi and Martin Luther King.”¹⁹ Similarly, Milan Raskovic from Canvas mentioned: “Otpor was already using some strategies and tactics that Gene Sharp formulated in his book before even knowing about the book. Non-violence was a novelty that changed our reality.”²⁰ Non-violent initiatives paved the way for positive attractor behaviour to emerge in the midst of conflict. For example, youth transformed their relationship with the police through non-violent tactics such as sharing food and water with the police and giving them flowers, and in Croatia activists held vigils to prevent violence against citizens of different nationalities.

While demonstrating in the streets of Serbian and Croatian cities, peace activists constantly tried to self-correct and learn from past mistakes by altering the usual patterns of interaction with the police. Non-violent initiatives helped them to open up to the Other, in this case police, because such actions did not provoke negative or violent responses. Peace activists stress that instead of throwing stones and Molotov cocktails, they worked towards establishing a more humane relationship with the police by talking to them, by giving them flowers and food, and the police eventually refused to act against them.²¹

Otpor gained massive support not only by employing and educating people in non-violent tactics against the regime such as humour and art, but also by doing public service for the disillusioned citizens. Their action was not always successful, but they were able to learn from past mistakes, adapt and self-correct. Milan Raskovic states: “Things were happening so quickly and we had to be flexible and

18 *Ibid.*

19 In-person interview with Gordana Subotic on 22 May 2013 in Belgrade, Serbia.

20 In-person interview with Milan Raskovic on 23 May 2013 in Belgrade, Serbia.

21 Skype interview with Katarina Kruhonja on 1 June 2013 and in-person interview with Milan Raskovic on 23 May 2013 in Belgrade, Serbia.

adapt to the changing conditions. Many mistakes were made, but this is how we learned and improved our practice.”²² Otpor did not have a hierarchical leadership structure, but individuals who took responsibility for changing the status quo. They took on the responsibility to implement change, but change would not have happened if they had not had support from among the citizenry. As they realized that it was not enough to protest in the streets and that they needed wider support, the youth started doing public service for the citizens, such as collecting garbage and cleaning the streets, showing that they should be taken seriously as responsible agents of change.

Through constant learning and self-correction, the Otpor members discovered that by doing public service they could change citizens’ views about themselves, and citizens indeed joined their ranks in ever-growing numbers. As the ideas of peaceful action, resistance and non-cooperation started gaining traction and support among the wider population, Otpor became a collective voice of the disillusioned nation and an expression of its readiness to support peaceful change, which resulted in the overthrow of the regime. Srdja Popovic, the leader of the Otpor movement, later succinctly said: “We won because we loved life.”²³ It can be argued that they won because they showed dedication and responsibility to choose a better option for and on behalf the people and the country they loved.

6 Discussion and Implications

This section summarizes the findings discussed in the previous section and focuses on the methodological, practical and theoretical implications of those findings. The findings suggest that the responsibility to act for peace requires inclusion and relationship to the Other, the Enemy. Constant self-correction, inquiry, learning from past mistakes and non-violent strategies helped the peace activists to open up to the Other, which served as a positive attractor in a conflict system that resulted in peaceful outcomes. Ethnic inclusion, interdependence and cooperation can be a tool to counteract distrust and beliefs about the Other that are transmitted to us via historical narratives. Rejecting the patterns of conflict behaviour that rest on a clear delineation between Self and Other made it possible for peace activists to embark on a journey of self-correction, inquiry and learning. Responsibility should be understood as choosing a *better response* that can benefit both Self and Other. This type of response is based on inclusiveness and care for the Other.

6.1 Methodological Implications

The findings suggest that systemic thinking based on DST theory and Levinas’ concept of responsibility as care for the Other represent a useful framework for tracing positive attractors, *i.e.* factors that can generate positive change in conflict systems. A constant challenge for scholars of conflict resolution is to find

22 In-person interview with Milan Raskovic on 23 May 2013 in Belgrade, Serbia.

23 York (2001).

modalities to understand certain persistent and recurring types of conflict behaviours and dynamics. The analysis of the peace activists' narratives, as presented in this study, generates a much-needed understanding of how and why certain patterns of engagement lead to peaceful outcomes.

Dynamical systems theory helps us understand the positive change that occurred and provides us with insights into how individuals with no apparent power were capable of introducing change. The change came about when certain individuals succeeded in resisting the pull of the existing conflict attractor, enabling events and situations to be interpreted in a different way. The key to change in patterns of interaction was co-creation of new meanings and subsequent practices through self-correction, openness to the Other and inquiry. When certain actors began to act in a way that is inconsistent with the conflict system, they were destabilizing it, and conditions for transformation could emerge. As systems tried to stabilize and cohere, a new set of rules for action appeared. As we saw from the findings, the actions of a few courageous individuals, based on new meanings and rules of engagement that include cooperation, inclusiveness, self-correction and inquiry, not only led to transformational outcomes and change in their communities, but set the scene for the restoration of relationships and sustainable peace.

6.2 Practical Implications

One of the key implications of this study is that the practical objective of the peace activists in conflict and post-violent conflict situations should be altering patterns of interaction. By transforming engagement patterns, the possibility of hearing and recognizing each other's views becomes more palpable. Our ability to act is connected to our embedment in certain discourses, meanings and ways of thinking that imply self-imposed limitations around one individual's willingness to act and the effectiveness of such singular acts. It takes "deconstructive inventiveness in opening ... foreclusionary structures, so as to allow for the passage toward the Other" (Derrida, 1989: 60). It takes imagination and creativity to reveal responsibility of the Self and the Other despite discursive and sociocultural systems we live in. To reveal this power within us is an act of creativity through which our agency is reconfigured. We saw this creativity in the examples of peace activists from the Balkans who started changing practices of dealing with conflict through co-creation of new meanings, self-correction and change in patterns of interaction.

Going back to the individual, and his or her capacity to act and think as an agent of positive change, requires change in thinking about individuals as passive and marginal. By identifying individual action that contributed to the change in the system, we are actually *repoliticizing* the individual by uncovering her or his agency. On the basis of the analysis of peace activism in the Balkans, we can posit that agency and capacity to introduce and generate change do exist at the individual level. Individual actions are, in a way, a response to the structural and institutional inability to address the needs and frustrations of the people in times of conflict. The resistance of certain individuals and groups to comply and interact with the conflict structure, its rules and practices is an indication of hope. How-

Borislava Manojlovic

ever, responsible acts of interrupting and rejecting violence are often denied recognition. Responsible action is in that sense an independent and non-reciprocal action that comes from our sense of responsibility for the Self and the Other.

6.3 Theoretical Implications

There is a need to expand the concept of responsibility, which would have a significant impact on the practice of peacemaking and conflict resolution. The concept of responsibility, proposed in this study, is based on the common humanity and interconnectedness of human beings, even the Enemy. It enables us to embrace the Enemy and to act in ways that are respectful and inclusionary and, particularly, respectful of the humanity and dignity of the Other. It is through the new sense of responsibility that we can recognize the power of accepting to care for and serve the Other that enables us to move away from threats, coercion and violence towards working together *with* others to improve and grow. Such power suggests an axiological shift towards the ethics of self-control that takes into consideration not merely what is good for the Self or the Other, but what is good for both. The highest form of power is marked by non-reciprocal love and care for the Other as an extension of love for the Self, which should be the basis of the new formulation of responsibility.

This article posits that it is through the uniqueness of singular acts of responsibility for the Other and with the Other that our care and love can reverberate through the system and introduce a change. We saw these unique acts of responsibility in vigils to protect the Other from harm in Osijek; we saw it in offering food to the police at the barricades in Belgrade; we saw it in organizing encounters with the Others in safe places where imagination can break the cycle of fear and distrust, and many others.

7 Conclusion

The contribution of this study to the field of conflict analysis and resolution is threefold. Methodological implications imply that systemic thinking based on DST theory and Levinas' concept of responsibility as care for the Other represent a useful framework for tracing positive attractors, *i.e.* factors that can generate positive change in conflict systems. Practical implications suggest the importance of altering patterns of interaction in the conflict system that can lead to positive attractor behaviour and repoliticizing the power of an individual. Theoretically, the study emphasizes the need to expand the concept of responsibility based on the common humanity and interconnectedness of human beings, even the Enemy.

Responsibility for peace implies that peace is a work in progress that demands dedicated and continual efforts during and after conflict as well as in peaceful times. We can support others in taking responsibility for peace by strengthening the awareness that each and every individual has the power and capacity within them to take on the responsibility to act. Responsibility for peace, as presented in this article, is a theoretical construct that can be used to inform

the much-needed shift in discourses that inform policy and political action. It illuminates the fact that current conflicts cannot be addressed through violent means, but through sustainable and legitimate mechanisms that promote dialogue, learning and inquiry with the Other at all levels of human existence. We can take responsibility for peace any time and in any place, in our families, work place and community, by promoting creative, cooperative relationships. The seeds of peace are planted when people start inquiring and asking questions. It all starts with one individual finding another and questioning what can be done to stop or prevent violence.

Borislava Manojlovic

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Borislava Manojlovic

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