



## **Balkan Peace Team - International e.V.**

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### *Nonviolent Intervention in the Conflicts of Former Yugoslavia: Sending Teams of International Volunteers*

The volunteer project Balkan Peace Team (BPT) was founded in 1993 by European nonviolence and anti-war activists in response to invitations by NGOs and individuals from Croatia and Kosovo. The Croatian activists before had invited Peace Brigades International (pbi) but their assessment of the situation did not lead to pbi taking up Croatia as a project. The initiative for BPT came from two individuals from Britain and Germany who won their organizations to approve and co-organize (War Resisters' International and the Federation for Social Defence), and then brought together a platform of mainly European-based peace organisations, among them War Resisters' International, International Fellowship of Reconciliation, Federation for Social Defence (Germany), Austrian Peace Services, Dutch Mennonite Ex-Yugoslavia Working Group, Collectif du jumelage (Geneva), Mouvement pour une alternative nonviolente (France), Brethren Service and Peace Brigades International (with a somewhat special status because pbi never became formally a full member). Besides these member organisation, BPT country groups formed in Switzerland and the Netherlands, and later also in France. The member organizations sent a representative into a Coordinating Committee (CC) which met regularly and took an active role in the guidance and implementation of BPT. Its coordinating office was based in Germany, with the Federation for Social Defence, and was staffed with only one person most of the time. The member organisations (rather, most of them in reality) paid a rather nominal annual fee of DEM 1.200 (613 €), but in addition paid for the participation of their reps in the CC and in the General Assembly, and some of them helped with substantial fund-raising. In addition, Austrian Peace Services, Brethren Service and Quaker Peace and Service supplied and/or financed volunteers.

The Balkan Peace Team worked with small teams of two to five people each in Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia between 1994 and 2001. Originally, BPT started out with the goal to place 100 volunteers in Kosovo to prevent a war there. In the course of the development of the project in 1993, this idea quickly became reduced to a small-scale peace-team enterprise, and Croatia being more accessible than Serbia/Kosovo, BPT in the end started its work there.

### ***Goals and objectives***

“The goal of the Balkan Peace Team is to work for the peaceful resolution of the conflicts, demonstrating an international commitment to peace and working to increase that commitment. The Balkan Peace Team:

- seeks to identify possibilities for dialogue between the different groups;
- serves as a channel of independent and non-partisan information from the regions, reflecting all points of views;
- assists in the promotion of human rights for all;
- contributes team-members' skills for the benefit of all citizens, for instance by offering workshops in mediation and non-violent conflict resolution;
- acts as international observer at the scene of incidents or potential flashpoints;
- escorts individuals or maintains a presence in threatening situations.” (Quote from a BPT policy paper)

Protection and support of dialogue were the two foci of BPT. In Croatia protection was more

important, whilst in Serbia and Kosovo the priority was the support of dialogue between civil society activists.

### ***Principles***

“The principles of the Balkan Peace Team are non-violence, independence, and non-partisanship, with a strong concern for human rights. The Balkan Peace Team is open for co-operation with anybody, regardless of nationality or religion, who is committed to peaceful conflict resolution.” (Quote from a policy paper). In the exit evaluation, a reflection on these principles took place:

- **Nonviolence:** BPT always considered itself a nonviolent project, and most of its member organisations come from an explicit pacifist/nonviolent background.  
This commitment to nonviolence caused BPT to focus on civilian, grassroots groups and NGOs. The CC never debated what it meant in relation to the various military actors and political violence in the field. It was quite normal for teams to avail themselves of certain facilities provided by the international military, ranging from maps and other information to medical care, and several team members had social relations with members of international military forces.  
Neither did a commitment to nonviolence play much role in choosing volunteers. And it was an area of some contention how much of a role principled nonviolence should play in the trainings. People had to agree to nonviolence as a working principle of the organization, that was all that was required.
- **Independence**  
This principle, the final evaluation states, did not play any role in the practical work other than that attention was paid to receiving funds only if there were no political strings attached to them. But one CC member commented: "Personally I emphasise 'independence' rather than 'non-partisanship' in the mandate. For instance, as an 'independent' source of information, we were quite often making judgements, especially judgements critical of Croatian government policy. Usually I encouraged teams to quote local activists rather than give their own opinions, but I think that our report-writers were never really 'non-partisan' in choosing between the opinions of local partners and those of the regimes." (Quote from the exit evaluation.)
- **Non-partisanship** was the third principle. It was interpreted as being impartial when it came to dealing with the various sides of the conflict, and avoided making political statements (e.g. on military intervention in Bosnia), but it was stated that BPT was "partisan on the side of human rights". As a contradiction it sometimes was seen that on the one hand, the project worked on request, aimed at supporting local groups, and on the other hand it called itself 'non-partisan'. The principle was important in regard to relationship to the authorities.  
It also was important in regard to the reporting. It is assumed that BPT's reports found attention by UN and other official human rights bodies because they came from a non-partisan source.
- "Strong concern for human rights" was listed under the principles as well. This did not mean that human rights violations were always addressed- the teams in Serbia and Kosovo withheld from doing so because they assessed that any raising of this matter would lead to their quick deportation.
- **Follow the lead of activists and work only by invitation:**  
This was not part of the formulation of principles but the final evaluation identifies it as an additional principle. It says that the 'only by invitation'-rule was important mainly in the beginning, but in the later years of BPT it had not been used in a formal way anymore (neither in Croatia nor in Serbia/Kosovo). But the underlying principle of close co-operation with local NGOs on a partnership basis was continued in Croatia until BPT closed its teams there. In Serbia, the team was more independent. It maintained good contacts to the two organisations (one Kosovan, one Serbian) that had invited BPT, but certainly when beginning the dialogue project it went in a more independent way, linking the groups partly on its own initiative.

## ***Field work***

In Croatia between 1994 and 1999, BPT operating under the name of Otvorene Oci (Open Eyes) deployed two teams of volunteers, one in Zagreb (or Karlovac for part of the time) and the other in Split. There were two main issues around which Otvorene Oci's peace-keeping activities revolved:

The first was the issue of illegal house evictions which was a focus of concern for a number of local human rights groups. In the first years after independence, the Croatian state (or local authorities) tried to evict tenants from flats that had belonged to the Yugoslav Peoples' Army. Victims were usually ethnic Serbs. Accompanying local human rights activists to evictions was one of the first protection-related activities Otvorene Oci undertook in 1994. When called to an eviction, BPT volunteers usually not only came themselves but also called upon other international agencies and media to be present as well. In several cases the police aborted their attempts to evict the tenant when they found that internationals were present in the flat.

The second was monitoring the situation in the former Krajina (UN Protected Areas West and South) after the reoccupation by Croatia in 1995, and the accompaniment of local activists to the area. In Western Slavonia, BPT together with volunteers from other international projects entered the area within a few days, seeking to establish a continuous presence of observers. One volunteer spent two nights in the house of a local politician who was considered to be threatened.

Other examples of accompaniment of local activists are:

- A volunteer from BPT Karlovac accompanied a human right activist to Western Slavonia for an exploratory mission researching human rights violations and killings.
- BPT in Split in and after 1995 sought to maintain a regular presence in the area around Knin, and made a point of visiting villages in the area and inquiring after people's well-being, specially of the elderly Serbs who stayed behind when the Croatian army reoccupied the territory.
- The Split team accompanied in 1996 an activist from Split when a family from a village in the former 'Sector South' reported the bombing of their houses on the Croatian Statehood Day. The activist and BPT accompanied a representative of the family to the police to inquire about the investigation, and they talked with other international organisations including the ECMM. Afterwards, BPT wrote a public report that was distributed through the international BPT member organisations as well as to international actors in Croatia.
- In another case, the team accompanied an activist from the (Croatian) Helsinki Committee in a visit to two Serbian monasteries in Krajina in order to assess their needs (Balkan Peace Team 1996d).

## ***Exit***

Balkan Peace Team experienced three exits: First it withdrew in a somewhat planned manner from Zagreb in 1998 when an analysis done by the field team showed that there was no longer a need for that team. The withdrawal was discussed with the local partners who organized to compensate the leaving of BPT. The next step, the closure of the second office of BPT in Split, was more chaotic and initiated by a break-down of the team. It was the Steering Committee of BPT that was hesitant to end the work because leaving Croatia was seen as creating an imbalance in the overall conflict web – BPT would be working in the future only on one side of the Serbian-Croatian divide which would mean that it made itself vulnerable to the accusation of one-sidedness.

This breakdown then was repeated three years later, in 2001, in Kosovo. There again it was the team that refused to continue working under unclear circumstances and with a lack of administrative support it suffered from. Another contributing factor was that Kosovo was inundated with international projects after the NATO intervention, BPT had lost its exclusive angle, and the field workers were faced with staff from other organizations who did the same work but were paid for it while they were volunteers. Lack of funding, and the withdrawal of the first generation of the founders were some organizational reasons that added to the problems.

One of the French members of BPT, the Mouvement pour une alternative nonviolente (MAN), continued work in Kosovo with a 3-person team for some years under the name of “Équipes de Paix des Balkans”.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Clout and relationship to other actors***

To assess BPT’s strategy, two other points need to be mentioned. BPT was influenced by Peace Brigade International’s theory of unarmed deterrence.<sup>2</sup> For that reason, at least BPT member organisations expected to build up international influence and support. However, in the event, other than through its member organisations, very little was done in this respect, partly because of simple lack of resources.

When BPT was founded, it started to build up an alert network, but did not develop it far. Only once was it used in Croatia, when protest letters regarding the house evictions were sent to Croatian authorities. The reason for neglect of the tool may also be seen probably more in the work overload than in a lack of opportunities to use it. There was at least one incident where the Croatian team made use of the alert network of a member organisation: in 1996, on hearing of the arrest and beating of a conscientious objector, the team and a local activist succeeded in seeing the objector in prison and taking a photo of a military policeman threatening him. By the end of the day, War Resisters’ International had sent out an email alert, followed the next day by Amnesty International – prompt action that very likely stopped further beatings of the person concerned. Overall it can only be said that it is not clear how much the lack of international clout affected BPT’s efficacy.

Regarding BPT’s relationship to the international missions, especially UNPROFOR and the EC Monitors: Other than in the context of exchanging information or having to request permission to enter certain areas, BPT kept a conscious distance from them. This was partly due to the fact that BPT was an initiative of a coalition of pacifist groups that as a matter of principle did not wish any cooperation with armed actors or governments. But it was also due to BPT’s practical experience in the field. The international state actors (UN, EC/EU etc) were not held in high esteem, and so not being identified with them gave BPT in the eyes of its practitioners a strategic advantage to the operation on the ground.

### ***Recruitment and conditions of service***

The field teams of BPT were rather small, usually three persons per office, and there were times when even this number could not be reached. At the beginning of BPT, the minimal stay of a field volunteer were six months. That was later extended to a year. Some volunteers, mainly those from Brethren Service, stayed for two years. From time to time short-term consultants, for example former volunteers, joined the teams for a period of time between six weeks and three months. In total, BPT had around 50 volunteers.

BPT covered volunteers’ expenses for food, lodging and travel on BPT business. Additionally, BPT paid ca. 150€ pocket money. There was also a 150€ holiday payment. Volunteers serving with BPT for more than three months were entitled to reintegration help of 30€ for every month they worked with BPT. BPT supplied each volunteer with health insurance, third-party liability insurance, and accident / invalidity insurance.

The main steps to become a volunteer were the following:

1. Getting in contact with the International Office in Minden and receiving the Preliminary Questionnaire and other background materials.
2. Returning the filled in questionnaire with names of references to the International Office.
3. Interview by a local representative of BPT.

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<sup>1</sup> The story of these exits is described in detail in Müller 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See Mahony, Liam and Eguren, Luis Enrique (1997) *Unarmed Bodyguards. International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights*. West Hartford: Kumarian Press

4. On the basis of application, references and interview, invitation to the next scheduled Assessment (ca. 5 days, always held in a training centre in Amersfoort/Netherlands, organised by 2-3 BPT representatives (1 CC, 1 trainer, 1 former volunteer).
5. At the end of the Assessment, information whether s/he had been accepted as a volunteer, as well as (possibly) the date and location of her/his placement ("pooling").
6. Training
7. Placement (sometimes after some waiting time).

BPT had no age limits: maturity counted for more than physical age. In practice, there were no volunteers younger than 22, many were in their 20s, but there were also volunteers in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and one in his 60s. Slightly more women than men volunteered. Two volunteers were in a marriage at the time they joined, although some others had stable couple relationships with a partner in another country. Volunteers came mainly from Western Europe or the USA, although there were two Australians and one Filipina. Applicants from all parts of former-Yugoslavia or of "Yugoslav" background were not accepted. A significant minority of volunteers had prior experience in the region with other peace or humanitarian projects. The list of required skills volunteers had to bring was not very long. Volunteers had to be able to express himself or herself in English, and be willing to learn Croatian, Serbian or Albanian. They had to be mature, communicative, and to have past experience in demanding situations. High value was put on experience in another country, and conflict resolution or social movement experience, though none of these were "musts". Neither did they have to have computer literacy, or book-keeping skills, though the lack of these sometimes was felt a lot, because the teams were required to communicate by e-mail, write reports on computers, and do their own book-keeping.

The issue of social care for the volunteers who worked in highly stressful situations, witnessing much violence and human suffering, was recognized but answers mostly sought through mechanisms in the teams themselves. CC members offered supporting talks on request but there was no formal provision for counselling or therapeutic treatment.

### ***Training***

At the beginning, BPT followed PBI's example in combining trainings with an assessment. That meant that at the end of the trainings the participants were told if they would be accepted as volunteers of BPT or not. This process caused much dissatisfaction with the candidates, with the trainers and with the Coordinating Committee, and was abandoned in 1997 after a special meeting to evaluate and develop BPT's training procedures.

But BPT did not manage to find a continued policy on its trainings. Some trainings were organised with BPT trainers only, some jointly with a Croatian training group, other volunteers were sent to trainings given by other institutions (Kurve Wustrow, StadtSchlaining), some volunteers were placed without any training. One of the reasons for the problem BPT had with its trainings was its small numbers of volunteers. There were seldom enough pooled volunteers at one time for BPT to organise a training of its own. A consequence of the shortcomings in this area Peace Brigades International in their study of BPT found: "A clear deduction from the interviews with the team (both current and former volunteers) is the lack of a common understanding of the BPT mandate, policy, goals."

In 1998, a new element of "in-field training" was introduced to volunteer "summits". One CC member attended the whole summit and facilitated some sessions with role-plays, while another attended to facilitate a session on "cultural sensitivity". This was considered a promising development, but with the closure of the Zagreb sub-team and the collapse of the Split sub-team, no further summits were organised and the in-field trainings were not repeated.

The hand-overs between volunteers were often problematic. In Zagreb in 1996 and in Belgrade in 1998, three experienced volunteers left in rapid succession without being able to transmit much of the knowledge they had accumulated to their successors.

## ***Funding***

BPT's main funding sources were private donations (mainly from Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland), governments (Switzerland and Britain), organizations like Diakonia Germany, a Christian Belgian trade union, and the Lutheran Church in Germany, foundations, (Heinrich Böll Foundation for example), and the fees of the member organizations. Its yearly budget in the year 2000 was about 300.000 €. Approximately one-third of the funds came from private donors, one-third from government sources and one-third from foundations or other organizations.

## ***Conclusions***

Balkan Peace Team was the only longer-term initiative with a mandate that included UCP though not exclusively. In Croatia, protective accompaniment played a large role while in Serbia-Kosovo the main focus lay on (re-)establishing links of communication between youth (students, activists) from Serbia and from Kosovo. There was accompaniment when such activists eventually met, but it was dialogue, not protection that lay at the core of BPT's work there.

BPT is compared to other projects fairly well and critically documented with its successes as well its failures and shortcomings. The latter were mostly due to lack of organizational capacity. Many of its learnings are still relevant today, in particular regarding the necessity of having sufficient backing for each person in the field.

## ***Sources***

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Müller, Barbara (2007) *The Balkan Peace Team 1994-2001: Non-violent Intervention in Crisis Areas with the Deployment of Volunteer Teams*, ibidem

Schweitzer, Christine (2010) *Strategies of Intervention in Protracted Violent Conflicts by Civil Society Actors. The Example of Interventions in the Violent Conflicts in the Area of Former Yugoslavia, 1990 – 2002.* Vehrte: Soziopublishing. (Dissertation) [http://www.ifgk.de/oben/publikationen\\_all.htm](http://www.ifgk.de/oben/publikationen_all.htm) (Some original additional resources on BPT are quoted there.)

Schweitzer, Christine and Clark, Howard, *Balkan Peace Team - International e.V.. A Final Internal Assessment Of Its Functioning and Activities*, Balkan Peace Team/Bund für Soziale Verteidigung (eds), Minden: Bund für Soziale Verteidigung, Hintergrund- und Diskussionspapier No. 11, 2002

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