



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Workshop “Towards a Strategy for Reconciliation in the OSCE Area”

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Panel 3: Breaking the vicious circle – Reconciliation and conflicts in the OSCE area

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If you want to reframe relations shattered by violence and war as a basis for future security you cannot avoid the **difficult dialogues** that lie at the heart of reconciliation. Reconciliation can only ever be one component of a wider strategy to prevent, resolve and transform conflicts, but it is an essential one that takes us to the heart of the pain suffered in conflicts and helps move towards the extremely hard process of resolution.

I would like to reflect on two questions that have resonated throughout today’s discussion – the timing of when reconciliation be undertaken and who should engage – and then look at a couple of three specific examples to raise some of the challenges.

1. Timing/sequencing: the critical question is whether or not there is a **role for reconciliation in conflicts where there is no settlement let alone resolution** and where violence remains a very real threat and indeed an ongoing reality. Some argue that only with the security provided by an agreement can the parties to a conflict begin to engage in a process of reconciliation. I am pleased that many speakers today have challenged this, and I would like to share three reasons why I think it is never too soon to begin a process of reconciliation:

- Firstly, when I look at the conflicts in the Caucasus I see that **central to these conflicts are deeply contested interpretations of the past** and if these are not confronted it is hard to see how parties will be able to reach an agreement – these interpretations will plague any prospects for resolution.
- Secondly, in conflict contexts **the past is not simply the past**: the past is present in the everyday life of hundreds of thousands of people, who lost family members, homes and property, those who still do not know the fate of people missing in action and for those displaced by conflict. Their **needs and interests are all too often brushed under the carpet** until they are instrumentalised by politicians seeking to prove a point to the “enemy” or the international community. Again, if this is not addressed it simply perpetuates the cycle of antagonism and conflict.
- Thirdly, such people are **encouraged to live the past through the lens of emotive propaganda and are held hostages to resolution “on our terms”** rather than the search for a mutually acceptable peace through reconciliation, accountability, restorative justice and reparations.

There are conflicts in the OSCE – especially the Caucasus – where the intractability is now a matter of course for too many. Notwithstanding efforts to resolve them over two decades approaches have not

produced the desired results to date. I believe one key reason for this is that the **legacy of the past is an obstacle to reconfiguring new relations in the present and for the future**. Therefore if we want this to change we have to think of different approaches.

2. A second issue I want to raise is the **difference between what states or multilateral actors and what societies can do to promote reconciliation**. Again, we have heard today that we should be careful in creating a hard and fast division between the two. While this is indeed so, I would suggest that **processes that emerge organically from society – for instance from women’s groups, faith communities or NGOs - are often in the vanguard demonstrating courage, ingenuity and the popular desire to address the psychological legacy of war and to reach out across boundaries**, while states and politicians are often too constrained to do so. Experience shows that such initiatives are often limited to civil society elites or to capital cities and a challenge for everyone concerned is to make them more inclusive and to reflect the diversity of societies.

The **grand gesture of a leader** – and I think of Willy Brandt in front of the Warsaw ghetto in 1970 - can set the tone and empower others to act. But more often than not leaders seem to lack the **political will** to push for reconciliation, **fearing the consequences of taking such a risk**. Indeed political leaders are adept at **using rhetoric to sustain the enmity**, stereotypes and prejudice that divides conflict parties and conflicted societies.

Civil society is not a panacea that can circumvent the need for states and leaders to engage, but it can create **islands where people can work on reconciliation beyond divisive ethnic and political logic of conflicts** and this can create constituencies able to nurture and seize opportunities for change and encourage leaders to engage.

Practical civic initiatives to promote reconciliation:

There are manifold examples of what civic actors have been able to do to promote reconciliation in the Caucasus: track 1.5 and track 2 dialogue processes with all manner of constituencies – women, youth, journalists, educators, business people, politicians and officials; sometimes engaging in dialogue on sectoral interests sometimes dealing with the past or the myths that emanate from conflicts. Sometimes bilateral, sometimes regional. Working across divides these initiatives part of an incremental process to transform relationships, attitudes and behaviour.

1. Dialogue through Film (DTF): role of media

We have heard much today about conflicting narratives and contested versions of the past, and of truth itself. **Reconciliation places demands on the truth**, yet truth’s claim to objectivity must itself be reconciled with the **subjective story** that an individual, community or nation uses to understand their place in the world. In situations of conflict, where borders and minds may be closed, we may be dealing with multiple, mutually contradictory narratives facing off across a frontline.

Working with Internews Armenia, Internews Azerbaijan and the Stepanakert Press Club, the DTF initiative has brought together Armenians from Nagorny Karabakh and Azerbaijanis, enabling young journalists to make more than 30 films about the conflict that divides them: initially separate films telling the other something of their own society, subsequently half a dozen joint films and then a unique Turkish-Armenian-Azeri co-production *Memories without Borders*. We learned that the meetings could be very tough, but structured follow up and accompaniment has been an essential component for changing relations and perceptions.

Conciliation Resources has found that the **medium of film** can play an important role. Film, in both its

apparent depiction of an objective reality and its choice of perspective, **speaks naturally to the truth-story paradox**. Collaborative documentary film-making, which we have supported in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorny Karabakh and the Georgian-Abkhaz context can achieve a number of critical objectives.

- it can create a **framework for the juxtaposition of contradictory perspectives**. Film allows audiences to experience the subjectivity of their own story, as well as that of their adversary. They are invited to understand truth as more complex, multi-faceted and contested than single community narratives allow.
- **collaborative documentaries serve as a visible symbol of cooperation** between journalists and cultural elites often more associated with stirring up nationalist passions.
- film has a **unique capacity to reach audiences**: we don't need to depend on television, film can reach its audiences through the internet (YouTube, Vimeo), and can be publicised through new social media (Facebook, Twitter). This is critical if we are to engage with youth – most of whom have no experience of engaging with the other in the protracted conflicts of the Caucasus. The challenge is that youth can **engage with information through new social media in ways that can be both vitriolic in their enmity and inspiring in their creativity**.

An obvious question, **when confronted by the frozen peace process over Nagorny Karabakh and the concerns that there could be a resumption of hostilities, is what is the impact?** Tens, if not hundreds of thousands have seen these films on the internet and in facilitated showings, yet obviously these films have not transformed the attitudes and behaviour of the states let alone their populations: but when one places the modest investment in such work alongside the extravagant investment in the quiet arms race of the Caucasus and the periodic bellicose speeches of presidents that entrench enmity this is not surprising. Such efforts rarely produce dramatic results but are one component of a slow process that might produce results one day if other opportunities align.

2. While dialogue across divides is important, **single community initiatives are an essential component of preparing for reconciliation**. This involves individuals and groups preparing themselves and the ground for cross conflict encounters, but more than this it means individuals and societies reflecting on their attitudes and being prepared to **confront their own demons** and prejudices that stand in the way of reconciliation.

This raises an important question about **confidence building, a part of reconciliation, which should not be about making demands of the other but making demands of one's own community and oneself**. If societies cannot reconcile with their own role in conflict, how much harder is it to do so with the other? Understanding your own constraints can also help a process of recognising the constraints another community might face and even engender a more generous approach to working with the other.

I want to mention the work of the **Synergy network of organisations for internally displaced people (IDP) in Georgia**, which has been evolving over the past decade to **give voice to IDPs** within their own society. Developing the confidence to talk to their own society and authorities about their needs has also enabled some to **talk in a different tone to interlocutors across the divide**. One critical thing we did with them was to undertake a survey into the attitudes of IDPs. In doing this they were able to **puncture some of the hyperbole about IDPs being aggressive and in fact reveal their much more nuanced attitudes to peace, conflict and justice**. Displaced people in fact, more than most, understand the pain of war and while the notion of return is central to them, a return to violence is not. The work of this network highlights how important it is to **get beyond stereotypes that allow groups, often marginalised ones, to be used**, rather than have their real interests listened to.

Single community work also allows us to recognise the **asymmetries involved in reconciliation**: you can not assume that both sides will want the same or be prepared to invest in reconciliation in the same way and you can not dictate what the other should want, but you can challenge your own community to come to terms with its past and its role in conflict.

This leads me to another example that highlights the very difficult issue of identity. One of the first victims of violent conflict is complexity – you are either on one side or the other. Reconciliation, therefore, is about the need **to reintroduce complexity** and one element of this is that across conflicts there are **shared identities**. But if communities feel their identity as a people is under threat they will react negatively. And in this context, I was very struck recently when told about how a Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) organisation in Belgrade has been challenging society to reflect on identity and by extension **challenging people to think about the past**. LGBT communities have long struggled with prejudicial perceptions of identity and with discrimination. In Serbia dealing with the past was instigated by the women's and peace movements – a lot of LGBT people were involved because these movements were among the few places that people could engage with their identity and gender roles in society more generally. In Serbia, as in other contexts, engaging with the rights of LGBT community is challenging and many see the members of this community as betraying the nation. The rhetoric and violence that accompanies this reveals how easily “traitors” can be identified – and this reflects the need to deal with prejudice more widely if a society is to be capable of engaging with difference and perceived enemies.

Prospects - What can be done?

Thinking that these challenges can be dealt with only after a conflict is solved is perilous. A more positive approach is to recognise that by dealing with a society's own traumas it will be more able to empathise with those of the other. Initiatives in single communities and across divides will enable parties to a conflict to gradually seek mutually acceptable solutions that will not contain within the seeds of a new conflict. Reconciliation work cannot remove the critical political obstacles to peace and security but by being prepared to initiate processes of reconciliation it is possible to change the way in which obstacles are addressed. Such long-term processes require support to be given to efforts that offer challenge within societies; different sides need to be supported to do things they can and accept that this will not be symmetrical; the threads of contact between divided communities need to be kept alive and those willing to try to understand each other need support. Finally people have to make their own judgements - outsiders can't decide for them and elites should not decide for them: reconciliation is not about imposed behavioural and attitudinal change but rather about change coming because those who are in opposition to you see you acting in reliable, accountable, respectful and trustworthy ways.