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Ukraine: A peacebuilding agenda to bridge the divide

This paper reflects on the range of conflict and peace challenges being experienced by Ukraine with a view to proposing an agenda of peacebuilding work that can be implemented by both local and international actors. Based on two separate research papers, it focuses on the situation as experienced by the populations on both sides of the line of contact – in the Non-government-controlled areas (NGCA) of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), and in government-controlled Ukraine (GCA). It seeks to contextualise these differing experiences and perspectives with respect to interventions that have, to date, been implemented in the absence of a comprehensive political settlement, and recommends courses of action that can build a firmer platform for conflict resolution and sustainable development at this critical time.

The paper draws specific attention to the range of areas that require the attention of peacebuilding practitioners (1 - The urgency of peacebuilding); the impact of present policies on separating and marginalising the population in the NGCA (2 – Physical separation); the different identity narratives that have emerged on either side of the conflict divide (3 – Identity and stereotypes); how peacebuilding might engage Ukraine's ongoing reforms (4 – Reforms in a state of conflict and change); and the interaction between peacebuilding and the role of Russia in the conflict (5 – The influence of Russia).

The paper has the following recommendations:

- Move vigorously to initiate peacebuilding between GCA and NGCA populations before further deteriorations occur.

- Support peacebuilding initiatives that aim to change the culture of debate within Ukraine, so that diverse and potentially unpopular opinions can be heard.

- Review policies that exert pain on the population residing in the NGCA and promote measures that support existing social and economic connectors.

- Find ways to make the Donbas point of view on the origins and development of the conflict better heard and understood in the rest of Ukraine and beyond.

- Promote narratives that send a signal to the population of the NGCA that there is a place for them in the post-Maidan Ukraine and that their perspectives will be listened to.

- Work to build the capacity and confidence of constructively minded persons from Donbas to engage more effectively in dialogue with counterparts in Ukraine.

- Make explicit the connection between resolution of the conflict and the success of Ukraine's reforms aimed at strengthening the state's sovereignty, social cohesion, and security.

- Take advantage of the new wave of civic activism in Ukraine by equipping organisations with skills to analyse and respond to conflict.

- Ensure that the intractability of the conflict with Russia does not override the need to support actions at the grassroots and civil society levels.

- Support initiatives that provide Russian and Ukrainian civil society with opportunities to explore one another's perspectives and conceptualise how the two countries can re-build relations.

- Look to make use of Russia's influence to broaden space for engagement by seeking the participation of officials, academics, journalists and other leaders of opinion.

1 The urgency of peacebuilding

The largest country entirely within Europe with a diverse population of over 40 million people, Ukraine has undergone a conflict from 2014 which inevitably exacerbated existing fault lines within the country, and relations were put under further strain as the toll of war and economic crisis set in. Attempts to facilitate dialogue took place as early as the Maidan protest, during which negotiation and mediation practitioners looked to bring together people of different worldviews to try and build understanding of the perspectives held by the different sides.

With the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the peninsula were welcomed with solidarity by the Ukrainian population. However, as the crisis in the east turned more violent and more intractable and the overall economic situation deteriorated, further waves of displaced people escaping full-scale armed conflict were treated with considerably less warmth. Sometimes they were seen as competing for jobs and services in economically depressed areas, sometimes they were labelled as unwelcome refugees from a 'traitorous region' in which young Ukrainian soldiers are dying every day. Government policies aimed at easing the burden on these IDPs sometimes had the effect of escalating tensions as host communities considered their own needs to be no less significant than those of the newcomers. With the establishment of a militarised front line, work was needed to build relations between the civilian population and the military personnel billeted in and around their places of residence. Meanwhile, the complexity of reforms that the country was faced with required mediators capable of building effective policy dialogue that keeps duty bearers accountable and the citizenry informed.

The new range of needs led to a mushrooming of dialogue initiatives. While welcome in many respects, the proliferation of dialogue initiatives also led to confusion on the nature, and in some cases the purpose, of dialogue as more and more public events that brought together different participants became labelled as dialogues. In particular, some initiatives have taken a didactic approach that controls the agenda and appears to try to 'teach' attendees, rather than fostering listening between the parties and opening the space for acceptance that different views can exist. This, in turn, has undermined the idea of dialogue as a whole. Moreover, there is a clear absence of initiatives that look to reach across the conflict divide and into the NGCA. While people do maintain contact with friends and relatives on the other side of the conflict, the tactic often chosen for dealing with differences of political opinion is conflict avoidance in the interest of maintaining friendly relations.

With the crisis and the military conflict, increasingly extreme perspectives of 'the other' have emerged on both sides of the conflict divide. Peacebuilding practitioners should be cognizant that time is working against establishing the conditions for reconciliation. Improving these conditions could, in turn, broaden the space for a final political settlement which would, in any case, still be faced with the challenge of reversing the deterioration of relations between people on either side of the divide.

> Peacebuilding should not wait for a final settlement or for a mutually damaging stalemate before looking to bridge divides, as the need to de-escalate is only growing in saliency with the further deterioration of political relations.

Furthermore, there is a need to build the conditions whereby persons prepared to reach out across the divide can be heard in their own societies. Under the present heightened state of escalation, persons presenting unpopular, but potentially conflict-transformational, points of view risk marginalisation or, worse, sanctions from mainstream society. This sharply reduces the possibility of alternative views on sensitive issues receiving the necessary acknowledgement in public discourse.

> In addition to initiatives that look to build relations across stakeholder groups, peacebuilding initiatives should be supported to change the culture of debate within the country, so that persons engaged in different dialogues do not then find themselves isolated in the larger public space.

Human rights approaches, building a culture of democracy, as well as restorative practices, can all have the social impact of broadening the space for substantive peacebuilding.

2 Physical separation

The conflict has transformed Donbas both socially and physically. Since the initial outbreak of conflict, when military action forced a huge displacement of people, the stabilisation of the front line has allowed returns to the NGCA to take place. Ukrainian and DNR/LNR authorities offer different figures on the number of people who have returned, but there is consensus that returns are taking place, defying a stereotype in Ukraine that only the elderly and vulnerable continue to live there.

Social divisions have been reinforced and deepened by physical divisions that separate citizens from one another. Checkpoints have appeared on the line of contact and a permit system has been established by the Ukrainian government to control the flow of people. These measures notwithstanding, the flow of people across the line is considerable, with official Ukrainian statistics recording up to 30,000 crossings per day registered at the four existing checkpoints. Residents of mainland Ukraine travel across the line of contact to visit relatives and to check on property that they have left behind when forced to flee. Residents of the NGCA make trips in the other direction to claim state benefits and draw pensions, and to buy goods, which are often cheaper on the Ukraine side. Queues at the checkpoints leave people standing for hours. Sometimes it can take a full day just to cross the line of control. Many blame the Ukrainian government for introducing an inefficient pass system that is also susceptible to corruption and appears to create restrictions that go well beyond managing legitimate security concerns. This, together with the requirement that all benefit and pension claimants re-register in Ukraine, is part of a steadily growing list of measures that increase resentment on the NGCA side, where no restrictions on crossing have been put in place and IDPs do not face impediments to return.

Other restrictions are also having an impact on relationships across divides. Trade with the NGCA has been banned by the Ukrainian government, although some exceptions are made, for example, in the case of coal on which some factories in Ukraine are still dependent. The policy of prohibition undermines the peacebuilding potential of the trade in goods as a social connector that is authentic and in the interest of the populations on both sides.

The measures from Ukraine to restrict travel and trade are having a negative impact on attitudes, restricting the opportunities for people on both sides to have regular, direct, human contact.

> Peacebuilding activists should look to promote measures that support existing social and economic connectors.

These will dilute isolation, the resistance mentality and the trend towards increased dependency on Russia in the NGCA. Also of concern is the gradual replacement of the Ukrainian hryvna by the Russian rouble. While the former remains in circulation for the time being, time is working against it and one more economic connector between the populations could disappear.

Populations in the NGCA remain dependent on certain infrastructure in mainland Ukraine, such as water and electricity. Instances of their disruption are assumed to be an attempt to punish the NGCA population and put pressure on their authorities, which in turn raises questions concerning Ukraine's broader vision for the territory and the extent to which it wants to reintegrate a large and severely damaged territory with a hostile population.

Travel and trade restrictions and interruptions to utility services cannot exert sufficient pain on the NGCA to bring them willingly back under the sphere of influence of Kyiv, but instead tie them closer to Russia.

> Policies that punish the residents of the NGCA should be reviewed and opportunities should be identified to build organic connections with the separated region, therefore increasing opportunities for contact and exchange.

3 Identity and stereotypes

The identity of the Donbas population before the conflict was based on a distinct way of life anchored in an economy with a strong industrial heritage that accounted for some 16% of Ukraine's output and even more in terms of proportions of national exports. The area was a heartland for former President Viktor Yanukovych, whose speedy departure caused a profound shock. The process of association with the European Union, despite having started under Yanukovych's presidency, was suddenly taking place in an adversarial environment of geopolitical confrontation. In the NGCA it was interpreted as a hard turn towards Europe and a change of course for the country at the expense of good neighbourly relations with Russia, with which the region had always had strong cultural and economic ties. Seen from that perspective, the annexation of Crimea signalled the possibility of a change of borders and a historic opportunity to join Russia. A leading narrative expressed by emerging activists was one of 'liberation' of Russian people who would have the chance to re-join their kin in Russia.

The advent of war had a profound impact on the sense of identity for the people in the NGCA, who are now bound together through the shared experience of having gone through incalculable loss and suffering. There is considerable mistrust of the countries of the West, and the EU is not viewed as an impartial actor. The mistrust is further transposed more broadly onto international organisations looking to provide assistance in the NGCA. Forced to re-register in order to continue the operations that had begun in the early stages of the conflict, almost all aid organisations in the GCA were subsequently denied accreditation in a wartime atmosphere rife with spy hysteria and the search for traitors. In this context local organisations that were seen to be going beyond a purely humanitarian remit were also targeted. The OSCE is not considered to be impartial, despite the presence of monitors from Russia, and its reports are assumed to be biased.

This scepticism notwithstanding, there is a desire from the population for the West to hear their perspectives and their side of the story, though this comes with a certain amount of pessimism. Equally, there is a desire to be heard in other parts of Ukraine, though the space for that to happen does not seem to be available. Ukrainian authorities responsible for ATO prosecutions and restrictions on travel, trade and the provision of utilities are held in contempt by populations in NGCA, but the same resentment is not necessarily felt against ordinary Ukrainians. This signals that limited space does currently remain open for peacebuilding.

Given the need for building the confidence of the NGCA population to be heard, support should be given to initiatives that allow for the Donbas point of view on the origins and development of the conflict to be heard further afield, both in Western countries and in the rest of Ukraine.

Creating the opportunity to be heard should not be interpreted as agreeing with those views or propagating them, but rather as laying the foundations for more substantive dialogue in the future.

Opinion polls show that the original aspirations of liberation remain. A poll from June 2016 showed 36% supported the idea of joining Russia, 18% favoured an imagined future as part of a larger 'Novorossiya' state, and 14% wanted an independent LNR or DNR within the present borders. The poll also showed that there was still 10% that were prepared to re-join Ukraine with a Special Status, as stipulated in the Minsk agreement, though the idea of a Special Status for now remains an amorphous concept that is yet to be given substance. Despite the separatist preferences, the official position of the authorities in the region is in line with the Minsk agreement, and, while this is clearly not what the population was fighting for, the official position closes the space for further discussions of secession.

The idea of Special Status for the NGCA is not unproblematic for Kyiv as it is vehemently opposed by nationalist groups in Ukraine, who take a hard line against the separatist territories. This resistance is just one example of robust rhetoric coming from influential forces in mainland Ukraine. A hard-line discourse has emerged around the possibility of an amnesty for those associated with military action in the NGCA – another provision stipulated in the Minsk agreement. Other examples abound, including laws restricting broadcasting in Russian, the teaching of a certain version of history, and the prohibition of Communist-era names and symbols. Such laws, which imply a clear vector of cultural change away from Russia, together with the recurring shelling from ceasefire violations and other hostile actions presumed to be conducted by Ukraine's special services all combine to breed mistrust.

For that trust to be rebuilt, public discourse in Ukraine, and especially among the Kyiv-based intelligentsia, needs to send more signals that let the population of the NGCA know that there is a place for them in the post-Maidan Ukraine and that their perspectives will be listened to.

Ukrainian opinion leaders hold out the best opportunity of initiating cross-conflict dialogue by engaging counterparts from the media, academia and similar areas. The public discourse emanating from Kyiv has tended to reinforce one-dimensional stereotypes about the NGCA: of a Sovietised citizenry unable to come to terms with the end of the Cold War, and the array of labels – often dehumanising terms of abuse – that emerged with the onset of the crisis both demeans the people from the east, and at the same time betrays a somewhat superficial knowledge of Donbas. The experience of being spoken down to for so long can be a source of anxiety for potential counterparts for dialogue on the NGCA side.

Initiatives should be supported to build the capacity of potential participants from the NGCA in cross-conflict dialogue, acquainting them with conflicts contexts from other parts of the world.

4 Reforms in a state of conflict and change

Outside the NGCA and the adjacent territories, socio-economic problems are much more important to the average citizen than the questions of the war. The promise of reform was a driving motivation for the people who protested on the Maidan, and it has also been the focus of much of the international assistance provided to Ukraine. Reforms are required in almost every area from justice, to the monetary sphere, public administration, public finance, the energy sector, infrastructure and the fight against corruption, reflecting to a great extent the wide range of perspectives held by protesters on the Maidan. The most significant initiative to have an impact on social cohesion may be the attempts to reform Ukraine's centre-regions relations through a wide-reaching decentralisation programme which looks to build larger, stronger and better-resourced local administrations across the country. The history of reform in Ukraine has been of an elite-led process, where senior figures push through changes in order to meet the expectations of Western elites, without exposing them to the scrutiny of public discussion and with the result that in many situations these reforms are neither understood nor owned by the wider public.

Expertise from Ukraine's newly galvanised civil society sector is being harnessed to give oversight to the reform process and keep the citizenry informed and engaged.

Organisations supporting the reform process should make explicit the connection between resolution of the conflict and the success of Ukraine's reforms aimed at strengthening the state's sovereignty, social cohesion, and security.

Reforms are an opportunity to spell out the kind of country that Ukraine wants to be, and they can provide the long-term vision for reconciliation and reintegration that will underpin a peacebuilding agenda.

From amongst the vast array of organisations that sprung up after the Maidan, a large number looked to mitigate the impact of the conflict, especially for the most vulnerable. Work has included psychosocial assistance, legal and administrative advice as well as practical assistance, such as relief, shelter and livelihood work. Such groups work not only IN conflict (in an environment impacted upon by conflict dynamics) but also ON conflict, whereby their interventions seek to deal with the drivers of conflict between different groups and institutions, for example by moving beyond basic questions of humanitarian need and working on promoting the kind of integration of populations that sees their human security stabilised for the foreseeable future.

The range of activities in which civic groups are engaged throughout the country offer a strong backbone of social infrastructure for ongoing dialogue and relationship building between different sectors of Ukrainian society.

> The peacebuilding community should look to capitalise on the new wave of civic activism presently evident in Ukraine by equipping organisations working on different issues across society and throughout the country with the skills to analyse and respond to conflict.

Working in such a 'bottom-up' way may permit a depoliticised approach to building a constituency for peace and engaging, for example, nationalist groups that are opposed a priori to any concessions towards the separatist territories. In addition, many Ukrainian non-governmental organisations that were established before 2013 and have a strong record as implementers and lobbyists have professional contacts from their work that reach into the NGCA. Building the capacity of such organisations in using peacebuilding approaches will bolster their ability to reflect on how they may go about the re-establishment of contacts and the re-building of trust.

5 The influence of Russia

Russia's role in the Ukraine crisis has positioned it firmly as an adversary to the Ukrainian government and the West in general. President Yanukovych's decision to delay signing an Association Agreement with the European Union, which sparked the Maidan protests, received encouragement from Russia in the shape of a loan. Russia's annexation of Crimea encouraged the actions of separatists in the east of Ukraine, who were also joined and, in the key early stages, led by fighters from Russia. Russian charities and government agencies provide assistance in the NGCA while Western and UN agencies face severe barriers, and Russia has also filled the gap in meeting utility needs, such as gas, when these have been cut from the Ukraine-government side. Equally significant has been Russian support for the LNR and DNR on the diplomatic stage. Russia has not annexed the territories, as it did Crimea, which has been a disappointment among the population there, but it has represented their interests at the Minsk talks, where it stands as one of the four Normandy parties (together with France, Germany and Ukraine), but does not view itself as a direct participant in the conflict.

Representatives of the LNR and DNR are considered, and often referred to openly, as Russian proxies and are excluded from direct talks with Ukraine's national authorities. The talk of a proxy war is mirrored in discourse in the NGCA where there are widely held views that the conflict is externally driven, that they are the casualty of war between Russia and the West, in which the Ukrainian authorities have little agency. It is one of several factors that cause scepticism in the NGCA about the ability of the present Ukrainian authorities to make peace. The narrative of a proxy war follows patterns seen in other frozen conflicts where opportunities to re-establish contact and build confidence are missed on account of the

priority given to geopolitical considerations. In focusing exclusively on the 'true enemy' with whom they believe a final deal needs to be reached, national authorities are in danger of ignoring legitimate grievances and fears held by people in the territories in question. Indeed, apparent lack of work to reach hearts and minds has left Kyiv exposed to the accusation that Ukraine 'wants the return of the territories but not the people'.

> The international community should not allow the influence of Russia at the political level to deter support for actions at the grassroots and civil society level, where incremental progress can be made.

Russia has insisted on its right to limit Ukraine's sovereignty in the face of the EU's Eastern Partnership programme, which offered a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) to six countries of the former Soviet Union, while the EU has stood for each country's right to decide for itself. The stand-off between Russia and the EU, and an exchange of sanctions in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in the east, not only damaged diplomatic relations, but also hardened positions and reinforced the view widely held in Russia and the NGCA that the conflict is, in fact, with the West rather than with Ukraine. The downward spiral of sanctions has severely damaged

public opinion of Russia in Ukraine and vice versa. Not only do most people in the NGCA see their welfare as being tied to Russia, but Ukraine's economy, too, has been closely interconnected with Russia, and the new opportunities created by, for example, the DCFTA will not compensate easily the losses from the break in relations.

> Support should be given to initiatives that look to provide Russian and Ukrainian civil society with the opportunity to explore one another's perspectives and conceptualise how the two countries can re-build relations in the wake of the crisis.

The influence of Russia should not be ignored in strategizing for peacebuilding in Ukraine, as actions involving the population of the NGCA will require the goodwill of the Russian official representatives.

> Peacebuilding activists should look to make use of Russia's influence to broaden space for engagement by seeking the participation of officials, academics, journalists and other leaders of opinion.

In following such paths the peacebuilding community should emphasise that engagement does not signify acceptance, recognition or legitimisation and does not substitute diplomacy at the official level.

Methodology

This paper is based on two pieces of research carried out in October and November 2016, which looked independently at views held by local populations regarding prospects for peace and the range of peace initiatives undertaken. The paper by Dr. Samir Puri, '**Human Security and Dialogue challenges in Ukraine's Donetsk Region'**, focused on perspectives from government-controlled areas of Donetsk oblast, while **'Conflict Context Mapping in Non-Government Controlled Areas of Ukraine'** by Dr. Anna Matveeva looked at perceptions from the NGCA side of the conflict divide. The findings and recommendations of the two papers were further discussed by academics, policy experts, and peacebuilding practitioners at a roundtable in London in December 2016 to inform the final contents of this brief.

The original research papers can be downloaded from the PCi website at **http://www.peacefulchange.org/black-sea-region.html.**

Peaceful Change initiative

The Peaceful Change initiative (PCi) works with societies to prevent or reduce violence that is triggered by radical and divisive change. We aim to mitigate the effects of violence on people's lives, while laying the foundations for long-term peace and stability.

Our work

We run programmes in the Middle East (Syria), North Africa (Libya), and the Black Sea region (Ukraine). Our work focuses on:

■ Strengthening the skills of local and national leaders who are able to build relationships across conflict divides;

■ Supporting local leaders and civil society activists in practical actions to reduce violence and improve the sense of security of communities;

■ Fostering working partnerships between communities and local authorities, as well as between different local and national groups across conflict divides, to build confidence in a shared future;

■ Supporting civil society organisations to connect, share experiences, and be part of decision-making;

■ Developing and sharing practical tools and methodologies for peacebuilding;

■ Advising international agencies, NGOs, governments, and companies on how to achieve greater impact.

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