
Exploring the Potential of Cross-Regional Dialogue Platforms in Protracted Conflict Settings

Marko Lehti, Élise Féron, Vadim Romashov & Sebastian Relitz¹

¹ Dr Marko Lehti is a senior research fellow at and a deputy director of Tampere Peace Research Institute (TAPRI) and an academic director of master's degree programme in Peace, Mediation and Conflict Research (PEACE) both at Tampere University. His research in the field of peace and conflict research particularly focusses on peace mediation and dialogues, crises of liberal peace and liberal order, transformation of identities and the idea of Nordic peace. His latest book are "Contestations of Liberal Order. The West in Crisis?" (Palgrave 2020) that assesses the narratives about the crisis of western liberal order and "The Era of Private Peacemakers. A New Dialogic Approach to Mediation" (Palgrave 2019) that deals the turbulent change of international peacemaking field and the growing role of international NGOs.

Dr Élise Féron is a Docent and a senior research fellow at the Tampere Peace Research Institute (Finland). She is also an invited professor at the University of Louvain (Belgium), the University of Turin (Italy), and the University of Coimbra (Portugal). Her main research interests include conflict-generated diaspora politics, conflict prevention, masculinities and conflicts, sexual violence in conflict settings, as well as post-colonial interstate relations. Her latest publications include *Handbook of Feminist Peace Research*. Routledge, 2021 (edited with Tarja Väyrynen, Swati Parashar, and Catia Confortini); "Towards an intersectional approach to populism: Comparative perspectives from Finland and India" (with Shweta Singh), *Contemporary Politics*, 2021; "Embracing Complexity: Diaspora Politics as a Co-Construction." *Migration Letters*, 2020; "National populism and gendered vigilantism: The case of the Soldiers of Odin in Finland." (with Sarai Aharoni), *Cooperation and Conflict*, 2020; "Reinventing conflict prevention? Women and the prevention of the reemergence of conflict in Burundi." *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 2020.

Vadim Romashov is currently finalising his doctoral research on the everyday co-existence of Armenians and Azerbaijanis in rural settlements of Georgia. Since 2012, he has been affiliated with Tampere Peace Research Institute (TAPRI), Tampere University, and has participated in TAPRI-led research projects focusing on conflict-affected areas of the former Soviet Union. His recent publications have dealt mostly with the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations and the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh. Since 2016, he has been continuously involved in international research-based conflict transformation initiatives in the South Caucasus and Moldova.

Dr Sebastian Relitz is a research associate at Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena and director of the NGO Corridors – Dialogue through Cooperation. In his academic work, he focusses on the specifics of conflict transformation efforts in protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe. His monograph "Conflict Resolution in De Facto States: The Practice of Engagement without Recognition" will be published with Routledge in 2022. In his practical work, he develops and implements peacebuilding and dialogue processes with a special focus on cross-regional frameworks and consults international organisations on this matter.

Abstract: Protracted conflicts like those in the South Caucasus and Moldova stand as examples of the limits of international peace-building practices in addressing conflict transformation in various ethnic-marked conflicts, and in promoting reconciliation across the deep divides that these long-standing conflicts have generated within and among societies. A major challenge to supporting the transformation of protracted conflicts is that the conflict settings have been solidified as a new normality, and the polarised division between neighbours and within societies has been institutionalised. To address these challenges, we conceptualise cross-regional dialogue as a third-party facilitated process that brings together actors from various protracted conflict settings thus ensuring a greater diversity of opinions and societal standings. Cross-regional formats of dialogue, in our view, provide a space for suspending the dominant mutual antagonisms and for creative thinking about new horizons for the shared future. They enable participants and organisers to break away from the problem-solving paradigm as well as from the bilateral format of dialogues concentrated on one conflict, and thus they can be seen to provide safe spaces for dialogue in the midst of protracted conflicts.

Keywords: Agonistic peacebuilding, Cross-regional dialogue, Post-Soviet regional conflicts, Protracted conflict

Introduction

Protracted conflicts like those in the South Caucasus and Moldova stand as examples of the limits of international peace-building practices in addressing conflict transformation in various ethnic-marked conflicts, and in promoting reconciliation across the deep divides that these long-standing conflicts have generated within and among societies. Conflicts over Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria date back to the collapse of the Soviet Union more than three decades ago. Even if they are often described as ‘frozen’ and violence is escalating there only sporadically, the affected societies are hostages of a ‘no war, no peace’ situation. The August war in South Ossetia in 2008, the four-day warfare around Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2016 and the full-scale war over Nagorno-Karabakh in September–October 2020 have shown that large-scale violence in these conflict settings can still happen. These conflicts also raise significant humanitarian concerns and restrain the economic development of the concerned areas.

The fear of escalation of violence remains omnipresent particularly in border areas and in the disputed regions, but even beyond them, the presence of these conflicts affects the everyday lives of hundreds of thousands of people because of mutually antagonist identifications, the forms of which are often institutionalised, delineate invisible mental borders and narrow down horizons for peace. Societies affected by protracted conflicts and long-standing dominance of antagonist identities are characterised by their limited ability to tolerate the narration of alternative interpretations of the past that contradict prevailing discourses without a fear of re-escalating the conflict or violence (Praeger 2008). This sets significant limitations for pluralistic

politics, dialogue as well as human security. Conventional problem-solving approaches to peace-building as well as reconciliation models emphasising forgiveness face difficulties when coping with deep-rooted antagonism. Their major challenge is how to support conflict transformation in the framework of protracted conflicts in which the conflict setting is solidified as a new normality, and antagonism prevails.

For international mediators, protracted conflicts are the ‘most resistant cases’ (Bercovitch 2005) in which ‘the track record of third parties is not good’ (Crocker *et al.* 2005, 21) and there is a grim forecast that ‘there may, in fact, be no room and no role for mediation at all’ (Zartman 2005, 53). The solution for protracted conflict settings has been sought in manifold studies, and practitioners have developed various approaches to solve ‘unsolvable’ conflicts (see, e.g., Coleman 2003; 2004). Instead of prioritising the geopolitical level and top-down approaches, the way out from stalled state-level processes seems to lie in bottom-up initiatives and different kinds of civil society dialogues that can support the inclusion and legitimacy of peace processes and facilitate as well as enhance new peace initiatives, and outline perspectives for a shared future. However, in protracted conflicts, unofficial dialogue initiatives are also often stalled, restricted or politicised for various reasons, one of them being that mutual antagonism also hinders civil society dialogues.

If an overall resolution of the conflict appears as an illusion for the dialogue participants, then approaches oriented towards problem solving may not be the best format. Therefore, if we agree that there is no easy and straightforward solution for protracted conflicts, more emphasis should be put on transformative dialogues. Indeed, in protracted conflict settings, novel ideas and initiatives to organise transformative dialogues are needed to break away from dominant experiences of intractability and to engage and support local civil society actors. There is an urgent need for rethinking how dialogue formats could better address complex conflict settings like those in the post-Soviet area. From this perspective, recent scholarly discussion on agonistic peace-building opens up promising alternatives to address deep-rooted antagonism. Agonistic peace-building is not ‘primarily geared to achieving harmonious consensus’ (Suransky and Alma 2018, 36) or ‘finding the “truth” or some form of consensus about the history of the conflict’ (Maddison 2015, 1019). Agonistic peace-building is not about solving antagonism altogether but diluting it, and therefore, it may make a conflict ‘more liveable’ thus enabling transformative moments and processes.

The cross-regional format explored in this article is one option to break away from the problem-solving paradigm as well as from the bilateral format of dialogues concentrated on one conflict, and to enable transformative dialogue. At the level of official international negotiations, for political reasons, it is often not possible to com-

bine different conflict resolution processes or to launch initiatives that can be viewed as untested and therefore potentially risky. In addition, informal dialogues supported by the international community have also often been focused on a specific conflict. Civil society dialogues, however, offer an opportunity to look beyond national or conflict frames, and to launch unconventional dialogue formats, for instance those that are organised cross-regionally. Although there are some scattered examples of this kind of cross-regional platforms of dialogue, there is no systematised knowledge of their benefits to peace processes. For that reason, in this article, we intend to discuss the idea of cross-regional dialogues which bring together actors from various protracted conflict settings and which thus include a diversity of opinions and societal standings. Cross-regional platforms of dialogue have, in our view, the potential to suspend dominant antagonisms and to encourage innovative thinking in order to open new horizons for the future.

This article is based on research conducted within the framework of the OSCE Network project, ‘Cross-Regional Corridors of Dialogue: Developing a Complementing Track for Transforming Longstanding Conflicts’ (2018–2019). The project’s particular objective was to develop, redesign and test a format called the ‘cross-regional corridor of dialogue’². The research material collected from this project constitutes the empirical basis for our discussions of the potential of the cross-regional approach, and of how to better address the expectations of local civil societies and peace activists and thus invest in locally owned process designing. As detailed at the end of the article, our empirical material was collected during four data collection trips in 2018 and 2019 to Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, as well as during two experimental cross-regional dialogue forums held in Stuttgart and Vienna in 2018 and 2019. In total, we have engaged with 61 local peace-builders and international experts and held countless informal conversations with them. In order to ensure confidentiality, however, in this article, we refrain from naming them and from attributing quotes.

Based on this empirical data, and after reviewing the specific challenges related to the transformation of conflicts in the South Caucasus and in Moldova, we present a model of a cross-regional platform of dialogues and explain how it is particularly suited to protracted settings, and we discuss its application in the concerned conflict settings. In the last section of the article, we explore the potential of cross-regional

² The idea of a ‘Cross-Regional Corridors of Dialogue’ was initially developed in 2016 by scholars from the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) whose aim was to bypass major obstacles for innovative dialogue and confidence-building in protracted conflict settings. Since 2016, the original concept has been applied in several dialogue workshops by the IOS and the INGO Corridors—Dialogue through Cooperation. For more details, see Tamminen et al. (2016); and Lehti et al. (2019).

platforms of dialogue for fostering agonistic dialogue and conflict transformation in protracted conflict settings on the basis of our empirical material.

From Conflict Management to Dialogic Approaches in Protracted Conflicts

When dealing with protracted conflicts, conflict management approaches have been historically dominant (Coleman 2003; 2004). This paradigm approaches intractable conflicts from the perspectives of rational choice and state-centrism and sees them as an outcome of complex strategic and tactical calculations, and of a struggle over power and interests. Therefore, the dominating Realist school has primarily focused on the political and technical incapability of international intervention and mediation to support conflict resolution, and on the importance of the geopolitical context and of power relations. These studies search mainly for a rational solution to highly complex conflict puzzles.

An alternative peace-building perspective has emphasised the role of civil society (Poulligny 2005). As part of the liberal peace-building paradigm, the often-repeated argument by the tenants of this perspective is that civil society dialogues are required for bringing legitimacy to peace processes (see, e.g., Arnault 2014; de Waal 2014). Inclusivity and local ownership currently constitute an internationally agreed dogma in all peace processes which is difficult to bypass. However, even if inclusivity is widely recognised as essential for any peace-building and dialogue initiative, it has been challenging to implement in practice. The recent debate on peace-building has concentrated on the question of local, subaltern agency, giving rise to calls for localised practices of ‘peace formation’ (Richmond 2013; Roberts 2011; MacGinty 2010). The question that is most challenging in this regard is how in practice a third-party intervention is able (or not) to support locally owned, locally driven, and self-sufficient dialogues, and to enhance the inclusivity of a peace process. In these circumstances, de Coning (2018) calls for ‘adaptive peacebuilding’, meaning that peace-builders should be able to work with the uncertainty of the complexity of conflicts and not think about peace processes in terms of failure or success. Thus, their task should be to support ‘the ability of communities to cope with and manage this process of change in such a way that they can avoid violent conflict’ (*Ibid.*, 215).

During the past two decades, the conflict transformation approach has contested the previously dominating rationalistic beliefs of conflict management and conflict resolution. Since the transformation approaches regard conflict as a natural and important part of social and political life, the aim is not to eliminate it, but to transform destructive, violent forms of conflict into non-violent ones. In order to do this, transforming relationships, discourses, attitudes and interests has been prioritised.

The conflict transformation approach seeks to alter the underlying structures that lead to the expression of conflict in violent terms. Rather than trying to adjust the positions of the parties and find a compromise between their differing interests, the conflict transformation approach attempts to transmute the forms and functions of violence (see, e.g., Kriesberg 2011; Buckley-Zistel 2008; Miall 2004).

From a conflict transformation perspective, the distinction between peace mediation and dialogues can be blurry, and both can be understood more comprehensively as a third-party activity that can help to change the prevailing mutually antagonising perceptions or violent behaviour of conflicting parties by the confronting parties themselves. Peace mediation and dialogues can be then defined primarily as a peace-seeking exercise that ‘includes different forms of third-party intervention in order to support the peaceful transformation of violent conflict by sustaining dialogic interaction among conflict parties’ (Lehti 2019, 97). Thus, internationally promoted peace cannot be the outcome of rational third-party intervention but is something that emerges as the result of ‘hearing, centring and responding to everyday needs enunciated locally as part of the peacebuilding process, which is then enabled by global actors with congruent interests in stable peace’ (Roberts 2011, 2543).

In this article, our main research interest is to understand what kind of peace dialogues can open new horizons for peace in a situation where ‘paradoxical structure, depth of meaning, emotionality, complexity [of intractable conflicts], and trauma are often experienced as overwhelming to the parties and to third parties alike’ (Coleman 2003, 31). Following Feller and Ryan (2012), ‘dialogue is a movement aimed at generating coexistence and does so through encountering the “other” to share experiences’. But within protracted conflict settings, this can be difficult because when conflict escalates and is prolonged, ‘the opposing groups become increasingly polarised through in-group discourse and out-group hostilities, resulting in the development of polarised collective identities constructed around a negation and disparagement of the out-group’ (Coleman 2003, 22). This experience of polarisation and antagonism is hardly negotiable since all efforts to find a compromise would require renegotiating one’s own identification, which in turn could generate anxiety and feelings of insecurity (Rumelili 2015).

In order to enable dialogues that would be otherwise impossible, to gain public acceptance for peace processes, to prevent the escalation of antagonism into open violence and to create a condition for long-term transformation towards peace, it is necessary to address antagonistic relationships with different formats of civil society dialogue, but, as Chantal Mouffe (2013) writes, dilution of antagonism altogether and an all-encompassing solution are just an illusion and the best that can be achieved is the transformation of antagonism into an agonistic relationship. Agon-

istic peace-building refers to this kind of transformation and thus opens new paths to recognise and understand dialogue within the complex settings of protracted conflicts and to evade the dichotomy of the 'divine outside' and 'local victim to be helped'. Maddison (2015, 1015) argues that:

at best, groups in divided societies can aspire to an agonistic engagement, in which conflict across and about their deep, identity-based differences continues to define the relationship. While other modes of engagement based on, for example, deliberation may be beneficial in assisting elite decision-making, agonistic approaches also have a role to play in smaller-scale civil society contexts aimed at relational transformation.

The agonistic dialogue approach does not follow a conventional problem-solving method: it is a discussion which does not aim to eradicate antagonism through finding a consensus. Though no rational agreement or tangible results may be reached, nor even sought in agonistic peace-building, dialogue could be better conceptualised along the so-called Bakhtinian dialogic approach that emphasises problem-finding and continuity instead of closure. Through the process of dialogic exchange, 'people may become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another' (Sennett 2012, 19). Can the cross-regional model introduce one model to apply a dialogic approach within the context of the prolonged conflicts in the South Caucasus and in Moldova? Can cross-regional dialogue platforms constitute a pragmatic model for agonistic dialogue among local civil society peace-builders and peace activists?

The Challenges of Transforming Conflict in the South Caucasus and Moldova

The protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus and Moldova have been objects for international conflict management and peace-building for more than a quarter century. Nowadays, it is obvious that official and internationally-led peace processes have not sufficiently progressed and have not triggered any breakthrough or decisive move towards conflict resolution. Furthermore, in the South Caucasus, these processes even failed to prevent two major wars in 2008 in South Ossetia and in 2020 in Karabakh. Engaging and supporting civil society dialogues can offer opportunities to support transformation, but international organisations like the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) face difficulties when they engage in cooperation with non-governmental organisation (NGO) actors. The field of civil society actors is always diverse and thus external actors need to deal with problems of representativeness, inclusiveness and ownership. Still, even though local actors often

have the best experience of the situation on the ground, they may need some form of support. International actors, however, have been criticised for continuously ignoring and sidelining actual local needs, often because of deficient knowledge and lack of methods for engaging with local agency in the context of protracted conflicts (e.g., Millar 2011; Viktorova Milne 2010; Vitalis Pemunta 2012; Bleiker 2011; Newman 2013). Another difficulty is that any dialogue and negotiation format in the post-Soviet space that connects official and non-official actors would effectively mean engaging in dialogue with non-recognised or partly recognised state entities or actors from these entities (Ker-Lindsay and Berg 2018). At the same time, the exclusion and, eventually, isolation of non-recognised or partially recognised entities do not bear any sustainable potential for conflict transformation either. Hence, dialogue formats addressing post-Soviet protracted conflicts should be rebuilt upon the principle of inclusion and be locally driven.

In Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transdniestria, the room for dialogue and cooperation over the political and cultural divides is limited, and the turbulent international and domestic political environments affect the dialogue activities. In many cases, public and political discourses on conflict-related issues are severely constrained by perceived red lines. Influential political and societal spoilers often condemn meetings with the opposing side as an action against 'the national interest'. Moreover, policies and tendencies of isolation and self-isolation constrain the possibilities for direct people-to-people contact. Consequently, the number of working relations over the divide and information flows between the sides are limited. Given this lack of room for encounter and exchange for three decades after the violent escalations, a whole generation in Georgia/Abkhazia/South Ossetia, Azerbaijan/Armenia/Nagorno-Karabakh and, to a much lesser degree, Moldova/Transdniestria has grown up without the experience of mutual exchange with the other side. Thus, it is crucial to (re-)create and support spaces for such an exchange, especially between representatives of the young generation.

Although the international involvement and commitment has changed considerably over the past 25 years, the facilitation of dialogue over the divide has been an ever-present part of these efforts (Hasanov and Ishkanian 2005; Sotieva 2014; Zemskov-Züge 2015; Conciliation Resources 2019; International Alert 2012). While conducting the research within the framework of the OSCE Network project, 'Cross-Regional Corridors of Dialogue', however, we have witnessed not only limited progress in conflict resolution terms, but also an increasing sense of frustration with the lack of tangible results. In many cases, we have identified a growing dialogue fatigue as well as a sense of dialogue cynicism among civil society stakeholders and international organisations. Statements such as 'those people talk and talk with each other while they are travelling the world without any positive effect for their communities'

can be heard in most cases. This scepticism is particularly widespread in the break-away regions. To be sustainable, to overcome the growing fatigue and cynicism, to enlist public support and to incentivise wider societal involvement, dialogue must produce tangible outputs that have a broader added value for societies on all sides of the conflict divide. Otherwise, the peace dialogues and, even more importantly, the dialogue participants lose credibility and public support in their home communities. But because of cementing antagonism between the societies affected by the protracted conflicts, dialogues on conflict resolution are unlikely to produce such results. From a conflict transformation perspective, it becomes necessary to identify the similar needs and joint interests of the local communities who are the main beneficiaries of the peace processes. From the perspective of local ownership, the dialogue process should be developed more on the basis of local needs than on the objectives of international stakeholders. And this is a great challenge for all peace processes as the still existent friction between the different international and local agendas produces severe frustrations about international peace initiatives, especially within the populations of disputed territories.

International organisations like the OSCE have limited capacity to open spaces for dialogue in the South Caucasus and Moldova, but there are also some ongoing initiatives led by international peace-building organisations (e.g., Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation, Conciliation Resources, International Alert, Berghof Foundation, and CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation) that actively try to keep dialogic processes running between and among divided societies despite a challenging environment. Many of these initiatives have delivered valuable contributions over a long period of time. However, often the very same stakeholders, experts and civil society representatives take part in these various dialogues. Thus, even though continuity and stable relations between participants in dialogue formats are crucial, the issue of the ‘usual suspects’ becomes apparent in protracted conflicts: the same people meet repeatedly in different frameworks. Three main reasons can be identified for this. First, most international donors and stakeholders trust well established domestic civil society actors to implement their projects successfully, and they take a cautious approach towards new actors. Second, working with identified key civil society representatives may ensure a certain degree of acceptance of their activities within the host society and political system, as such actors potentially have a strong position within their communities and are perceived as proven multipliers. Third, there are many civil society representatives who are not willing to engage in dialogue with the other side; after three decades of protracted conflict and separation, people have lost interest in and hope for conflict transformation. To extend the circle of engaged participants and include a wide range of various groups on all sides of the divide, it is crucial to diversify dialogue processes.

The limited spaces for dialogue can also be explained by the restricted local ownership of peace-building initiatives. Aid dependency and the hidden agendas of external funders may also introduce negative dynamics to the conflict areas (Woodward 2013). To increase the chances of the success of peace interventions, international engagement should become more needs-driven and inclusive, for example, by identifying fields of mutual interest over the divide, by developing tailor-made approaches to tackle those issues, and by engaging in close cooperation with local communities. Our cross-regional model proposes to revisit the dialogue format to enable and empower local civil society actors, and to ensure their ownership over the dialogue processes in which they are involved. It targets conflict-affected communities in order to identify or to become more knowledgeable about joint needs over dividing lines.

The specific challenges for dialogue initiatives in protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus and Moldova demonstrate the need for alternative approaches and concepts of dialogue to supplement and in some cases replace the established dialogue processes. These approaches must develop a mechanism to include and empower various actors in bypassing structural political obstacles for dialogue. Strengthening local ownership in agenda-setting and during the implementation of dialogue activities is vital in overcoming the friction between international and local stakeholders. Accordingly, alternative approaches to dialogue must be based on the interests and needs of the dialogue participants and aim to facilitate meaningful positive change within their communities on the ground. In the next section, we explore how cross-regional dialogue platforms could respond to these challenges.

Cross-Regional Dialogue Platforms

Our empirical study focuses on the ways in which cross-regional platforms can support and become meaningful for local peace-builders in situations where dialogue fatigue prevails and trust in international mediation is low. At the theoretical level, we are asking whether cross-regional dialogue platforms can be useful in an agonistic peace-building approach. In internationally as well as locally organised peace dialogues, the common framework is a conflict-specific and often bilateral setting, in which participants of two opposing sides come together under international facilitation. This conventional approach implies that only conflict-specific problems can be addressed efficiently and are meaningful in 'serious' peace talks which are necessarily bilateral. We suggest complementing this approach by setting up platforms of meetings and interactions without the omnipresent necessity to reach compromises and solutions on concrete issues between the two sides. Such dialogues that provide an escape from bilateral antagonised positions may, for example, enable new perspect-

ives to envision the (shared) future that may, in a longer perspective, be crucial for generating confidence and trust, and eventually conflict transformation.

The proposed cross-regional platforms of dialogue are designed as processes that can bypass existing structural limitations in bilateral and monothematic frameworks, but not as a dialogue that would focus on or solve deep-rooted antagonism. A cross-regional approach to peace dialogues implies that individuals from various conflict-affected areas in different regions participate in the dialogue, and participation in the dialogue is designed in a way that there is no opposition of one conflict side to another side or to several sides. For example, even though a peace dialogue involving Georgian, Ossetian and Abkhaz participants could be seen as representing several conflict-affected areas, a Georgian participant could be viewed as representing one conflict side opposed to both Ossetian and Abkhaz, and therefore we do not consider this format as cross-regional. Considering how to define a region is necessarily a context-based exercise. For example, even if the conflicts over Nagorno-Karabakh on the one hand, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other hand, are separate and have their own dynamics, the South Caucasus also constitutes a well-integrated region from the perspective of peace and conflict processes. Furthermore, within the South Caucasus, intra-regional politics affected by divergent geopolitical preferences, views on a shared regional history, other territorial disputes, and often mutually opposing ethnonational identifications create their own complex regional ecosystem. Therefore, in this case, the proposed cross-regional framework should include participants from different 'conflict zones' of two or more regions. We thus also included in our scope the case of Moldova/Transdniestria. And, correspondingly, this cross-regional 'combination' was useful also for escaping the conventional bilateral format of dialogues between the two banks of the Dniester River. In a cross-regional format, it is important to ensure that participants have similar historical experiences or common frames of reference, which was ensured in our project by a shared Soviet past and similar political, economic and ethnonationalist tendencies that resulted in the wars during the early 1990s, and by the issue of the so-called de facto states (Broers *et al.* 2015; Berg and Vits 2018).

Based on experience-sharing among civil society actors from various regions, cross-regional dialogues are expected to strengthen the idea of multi-actor, multi-level processes that focus on problem-finding dialogue and practical cooperation. Furthermore, they can bypass existing obstacles of bilateral dialogue formats and provide new opportunities for exchange and confidence building across dividing lines within one specific region. In addition, cross-regional platforms of dialogue can open entry points for including different actors at various stages of negotiations and thus enhance dialogue potentials, as well as contribute to avoiding and/or overcoming deadlocks that are commonly faced in official negotiation formats. Nevertheless,

it might not be a model that suits every occasion, and its execution is necessarily context-based.

We started our study by learning from the experiences of various local peace-builders. We did not engage with local civil society actors as peace-builders in terms of their professional or institutional affiliations, but the attribution to the field of peace-building was primarily a matter of the participants' self-identification. Even though most of the project participants³ have worked for a long time in local NGOs, we did not aim to involve them as official representatives of their organisations, but as individuals ready to share their experiences. Our focus was on individual experiences and expectations in relation to peace processes and to international third parties like the OSCE. For that purpose, team members travelled to conflict-affected areas and met representatives of several local NGOs and other individuals with relevant experience in peace dialogues. These meetings pursued two objectives: to gain a broad understanding of local experiences of dialogue processes organised at the local, national and international levels, and to identify potential participants for the project's experimental dialogue platforms. Participants in these dialogue platforms were identified based on the interviews that had been conducted in the concerned conflict-affected areas, following various representativity criteria in terms of political and/or territorial affiliation—all 'sides to the conflicts' had to be represented—of experience in peace dialogues, of gender, and of age.

During the second phase, we organised two experimental dialogue platforms bringing together local actors as well as international peace-builders and scholars, who were invited to jointly think about how to adapt the idea of cross-regional dialogue to their often years-long experience of peace dialogues. A three-day experimental dialogue forum organised in Stuttgart, and a follow-up meeting half a year later in Vienna, brought together a total of 49 participants from the South Caucasus and Moldova, including participants from Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transdniestria, as well as the research team. Participants were expected to share their experiences regarding current and past peace dialogues and processes, as well as on recurrent obstacles and best practices. Another important objective was to generate new ideas and models for future peace dialogue processes and to explore opportunities to facilitate knowledge exchange between local and regional civil society actors and international third parties. At this stage, the organising team took on the role of facilitator, and participants worked intensively in small groups with target-oriented questions. The groups had been constituted in order to ensure as great a diversity of participants as possible, notably in terms of region of origin, gender and

³ In total, during the project, we have engaged with 43 local peace-builders in the various concerned regions, and conducted 18 expert interviews additionally.

age. Time slots were dedicated to brainstorming on the needs and issues faced by local peace-builders across the different conflict settings, but also on possible solutions, ways forward and ideas for improving the quality and impact of ongoing dialogue initiatives. Facilitators in each group, usually members of the research team, wrote down the ideas that came up on sticky notes, which were then collectively organised on whiteboards and presented to the whole group afterwards. At the end of the dialogue forums, concluding discussions were organised, and the team gathered the main outputs of the small group discussions for later reporting. The final step, a guarantee that local voices were heard, was the organisation of a joint feedback session half a year after the first meeting, gathering 18 participants.

Beyond Bilateral Dialogue: Avoiding Politicisation and Securitisation

Our observations of experiences and opinions of participants during the two experimental dialogue platforms, as well as the follow-up session, support our hypothesis that cross-regional platforms can enable participation and connections that would be otherwise impossible or highly problematic. We received strong evidence that the participants' needs and interests were quite similar across conflict settings, including a need for local ownership of dialogue processes, for international support, for better access to international media, for capacity building, for exchanges of good practices and for documentation of experiences. Likewise, some obstacles were mentioned by almost all participants, such as personal security issues, peace-building fatigue, and a lack of financial incentives for participating in dialogue activities.

Cross-regional platforms were seen to have the potential to bring additional value in coping with this lack of internationally supported dialogue. It was noted that cross-regional platforms can avoid or soften the polarisation that dominates or ruins many other dialogue forums. Cross-regional formats can help avoid the politicisation and securitisation patterns that threaten bilateral dialogues among civil society representatives in protracted conflict settings because they do *not* mirror official negotiation frameworks. Furthermore, the shift from bilateral to multilateral participation sets them apart from official processes, and thus cross-regional formats appear less useful for legitimising state- and nation-building. They are therefore regarded by elites as less threatening to existing power structures.

In the case of South Caucasus and Moldova, a fundamental challenge for organising any dialogue is the disputed status of the contested territories of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transdniestria and Nagorno-Karabakh. During the last three decades, these entities have developed features and structures of statehood, although they are not recognised by most international actors as independent states. The status issue and

the recurring violence do not only affect official conflict resolution initiatives, but they also have severe consequences for the design and implementation of non-formal dialogue processes, especially within the South Caucasus. At present, it is difficult for Georgians to travel to Abkhazia and South Ossetia and vice versa. The same applies to the contacts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Therefore, it is necessary to use 'neutral' locations outside the respective conflict settings. The problems described above often make it necessary to hold a dialogue meeting outside the region. However, due to the status issue, passports from these entities and other legal documents are not recognised by most states, which restricts opportunities for outside travel. For those living within the unrecognised or partly recognised states, this also impedes opportunities to participate in international dialogue activities. Such restrictions do not only increase the workload to organise dialogue meetings abroad, but also evoke negative experiences with travelling for such meetings, which may discourage potential participants.

In Moldova and the South Caucasus, including the so-called de facto states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria, the transnational activities of NGOs are often controlled, closely observed and utilised for political means by the parties involved. In this context, bilateral civil society meetings are most vulnerable to political and social pressure, especially regarding the participation of people from disputed territories, since international contacts of civil society actors residing in these areas are easily attached to the status issue by mainstream discourses. To enable cross-divide civil society dialogues, it is necessary to launch platforms that are more resilient and that do not generate immediate suspicion among authorities. Such general geographic labels as 'Black Sea region' bypass more easily the officials' radars. For this reason, cross-regional formats of dialogues offer a good possibility to overcome these serious limitations. Since, in such settings, participants do not attend a dialogue meeting on a specific conflict, a cross-regional framework enables participants to enter into a direct exchange with each other without being exposed to accusations of collaboration with 'the enemy'. Thus, the cross-regional framework can serve as a conflict-neutral umbrella and as a safe space for dialogue, while during these meetings, private bilateral discussions usually happen too. And these bilateral meetings, according to the regional participants of our project, are still most meaningful dialogic encounters for specific conflict transformation, although they were enabled under the framework of cross-regional forums.

One vital question in the design of cross-regional dialogues is the question of regional scope. Even if there are various protracted, intractable conflicts all around the world, it is obvious that proximate regions constitute a meaningful context for cross-regional dialogues. In our case, this refers to the post-Soviet space in general, but our participants share also the experience of coping with the so-called de facto state is-

sue. The creation of an atmosphere of trust and the shifting of dialogues from formal to informal settings are crucial for cross-regional dialogues, and informal relationships are easier to create with participants sharing similar experiences. This is not to argue that sharing experiences with people from other regions beyond the post-Soviet space is not beneficial, but that a trusting and productive atmosphere is easier to achieve among people with a more directly shared experience of the past.

Enabling Shared Visions for the Future in a Cross-Regional Dialogue

During our meetings, participants put aside their institutional affiliations and engaged in the discussions as individuals with experience in various local peace organisations and initiatives. According to our observations within the described project, facilitators or organisers of cross-regional platforms need in each case to carefully design the participation policy and method in order to avoid misinterpretation of the political importance of the forums. In our case, we were actively selecting participants based on their willingness to participate, to share their experience of cross-divide dialogues, to learn something new, and to make new contacts. This kind of organisation requires the facilitators to play an active role.

We find it important that participants in the dialogues were not regarded as representatives of any organisation, nor of any nation or political unit, but only as individuals. There was, however, certainly no prerequisite to reject national identities and solidarities, and participants identified themselves as citizens of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova as well as of the de facto states. Still, most participants did not feel that they were representatives of their states but of civil societies. In a few cases, when conflict-related issues popped up in the discussions and emotions were heightened, facilitators and participants quickly managed to calm the situation and move the conversations in other directions. The informal and confidential atmosphere was a crucial factor for effectively de-escalating these tensions. It was interesting to observe that boundaries of appropriate behaviour were 'tested' by the participants at the arranged meetings as well as in leisure conversations when jokes were usually told. Such 'testing' enabled by the cross-regional setting of informal conversations increased and strengthened mutual understanding, including among participants who came from societies otherwise set in antagonistic relationships. Cooperation over divides needs strong commitment from all participants, and committed participation also requires that all involved parties find participation meaningful. Therefore, dialogue must be based on the interests and needs of participants, and participants also need to have the ability to shape the agenda even if there is some fixed framework primarily imposed by the structural settings of funding mechan-

isms. Participation needs to be experienced as meaningful for the participants personally, and for the communities to which they belong.

Cross-regional platforms, however, do not aim at solving issues and making agreements; they are organised primarily for generating new thoughts and for opening new horizons for the future. An important challenge is therefore to create motivation and inspiration without practical and straightforward outcomes for the participants' communities. Even though the immediate goal of cross-regional dialogues is to build spaces in which disagreement and communication can co-exist, and to reduce negative prejudice and (re-)build trust, eventually the meetings' agenda must include some more concrete issues for the participants. In order to prevent frustration, it is crucial that participants can influence the dialogue objectives, which increases motivation and engagement. In addition to the lack of ownership, the feeling that ideas and initiatives originating in civil societies are not listened to and are not supported significantly contributes to dialogue fatigue. For our participants, the informal presence of the OSCE staff members in both meetings—though not in all sessions—was regarded as highly valuable, and as a recognition of the civil societies' activities at the 'top-official' international level, albeit without any sign of political recognition of the *de facto* states thanks to the informal setting of the meetings. Directly sharing their knowledge and ideas with people working in international organisations was regarded by civil society participants as an empowering moment that strengthened their agency and self-esteem, which would further enable their creative thinking and action.

Such meetings also offer evidence that cross-regional platforms can enable international organisations such as the OSCE to informally engage with local peacemakers from disputed territories in their private capacity. The OSCE and the organisations alike are obviously prudent when working with non- or partly-recognised entities as their engagement should be immune to all misinterpretation as a sign of recognition. The formal support and organising of bilateral civil society dialogues can be misinterpreted as interventions in official peace processes, which would not be possible without a formal mandate. A cross-regional setting, however, is less sensitive because it is not focused on a particular conflict. Formal and informal participation in these platforms is possible without a mandate and can be included in the routine work of international organisations. Less politicised cross-regional settings thereby create new spaces to facilitate exchanges between local civil societies and formalised structures.

Organising dialogues with groups of diverse professional and personal backgrounds can also address dialogue fatigue. Including academics, businesspeople, artists, traditional community authorities, engineers and medical workers, to name a few, can

introduce new alternative perspectives, contest routinised practices, and facilitate the generation of non-trivial ideas for cooperation across conflict divides. During our project, we broadened participation from local NGOs to include also international academics and to provide a partial academic framework for the meetings. This academic and scientific extension was not difficult to arrange since many local civil society actors have a background in teaching and/or research. This move has two main benefits. First, academic or semi-academic meetings are less suspicious for the surveillance of local authorities. Second, many participants found that mixing the pragmatic experiences of local peacemakers and theoretical academic content was inspirational. The format breaks away from conventional peace dialogues and can potentially generate new thoughts and perspectives.

Interestingly, some common ideas for supporting the initiated dialogue emerged across small group discussions, as, for instance, the possibility of creating cross-regional platforms of local peace-builders as well as online networks in order to foster their work through exchanges of good practices and peer support. The role of education, and the possibility for peace-builders to educate children about the importance of dialogue were also singled out as options that have been looked at insufficiently by the international community. Also, co-authoring academic articles and books was suggested as a prospective direction for further collaboration and joint creative thinking on shared concerns and ways to address them. International support here was envisioned in the form of facilitating the publication process either by funding a local journal at best, or by helping to access international publishers and academic institutions at the very least.

In addition, the dialogue forums elicited some thoughts on how local peace-builders could further support dialogue and conflict transformation, such as producing visual content that could be distributed to local populations (for instance, cartoons and movies), working with the media to change the dominant narratives about each concerned conflict (for instance, by sharing success stories), facilitating the digitalisation of conflict memories and archives, or building the linguistic skills of the local populations in order to improve cross-cultural dialogue. Participants also came up with a series of ideas on how to better link informal and formal dialogue processes, and on how cross-regional dialogue platforms could support official initiatives, for instance by producing policy papers for international policymakers, or by compiling a list of concrete issues to be addressed in order to provide 'a clear vision and programme for the next steps'.

All in all, most of the participants considered that the cross-regional dialogue platforms had been a success and were eager for the project to continue. Their suggestions for pursuing the initiative included renewing the dialogue process on an

ongoing basis by gradually integrating new participants besides the 'core ones', and drawing and circulating the lessons learned after each dialogue phase in order not to constantly 'reinvent the wheel'. The participants acknowledged that despite the obvious dissimilarities between the different conflict-affected areas, these dialogue platforms had allowed them to identify common issues and concerns, as well as to implement peer learning through exchanges of ideas, experiences and 'tips'. They were also eager to hear from each other about the on-the-ground situation in the respective conflict-affected areas, and about the material difficulties that the others were facing in their peace-building activities.

Conclusion: Agonistic Dialogue

Cross-regional dialogues obviously display certain potential problems, limits and pitfalls that require a closer look, but, in our project, we concentrated on exploring and testing the format potentiality. What worked in our case, with our participants and in the context of the South Caucasus and Moldova, would not necessarily work in another setting. We do not aim to introduce a uniform model, but a format of dialogue that can be tested in and adapted to different contexts. Our material offers compelling evidence that cross-regional platforms of dialogue can provide a conflict-neutral umbrella and a safe space for dialogue for local peace-builders and give them opportunities to meet discretely with their counterparts from the 'other side'. In addition, other tangible outcomes for our participants materialised in peer learning and in exchanges of practices, ideas and 'tips'. The cross-regional format also provides a way to give a voice to civil society actors, especially from *de facto* states, who are often not heard at the international level because their voices are hijacked by more powerful actors or ignored altogether. Cross-regional dialogues, following the intersectionality principle, can also foster more representativity by inviting representatives of diverse sections of the concerned populations (e.g., youth, women, religious groups, etc.). The organisation of these dialogues, therefore, can favour a wider social inclusion to enlist popular acceptance.

From a theoretical perspective but with pragmatic relevance, the most interesting question is how these platforms can suspend antagonism without having any conflict-specific reconciling element. The cross-regional dialogue format can represent one pragmatic format of agonistic dialogue, as it does not aim to reconcile, solve conflicts or achieve consensual harmony, but just enable participants to accept the existence of different perspectives and gain respect for each other. This respect is expressed in informal, pragmatic and embodied terms. It happens more through jokes and banter during informal social gatherings than through formal statements. The cross-regional format thus seemingly enables a certain ease to express respect among participants. It is less likely that an issue that would force participants to seek

cover behind the presumed safety of antagonised roles would appear. Even if antagonising issues cannot be completely avoided, they can be more easily set aside or suspended without being solved and/or denied when different narratives unrelated to one specific conflict are present in the same time and space (Lehti and Romashov 2021). Cross-regional dialogues enable what Maddison (2015, 1015–1016) calls a ‘dialogical engagement across difference’, and this kind of engagement contributes in its limited capacity to ‘an expanded understanding of the other, with the aim of sustaining peace and, over time, transforming the underlying conflict—not towards agreement, but in a direction that enables greater mutual understanding’. This can be regarded as a precondition for providing safe spaces for dialogue in the midst of protracted conflicts, and as such, it is a major achievement, which also indicates the potentiality and strength of cross-regional platforms of dialogue.

One obvious issue that came up in the discussions was the need for consistency and stability. In order to be efficient, cross-regional dialogues should be designed not as one-time events but as ongoing and sustained processes. How the cross-regional dialogue format can evolve in the longer term is a question that we were not able to observe. Organising these dialogues, even on a small scale, requires considerable funding. The challenge is that donors do not always look beyond conventional formats or understand that alternative platforms do not always produce immediate and visible results. The relevance of cross-regional platforms of dialogue should not be connected to official processes as linkages that are too straightforward would contradict the whole principle on which they are based. These platforms may or may not have relevance to official processes in the long-term perspective, but that is not a criterion to evaluate the relevance of cross-regional dialogues. Therefore, there is a need for ‘strategic patience’ on the part of donors (Lehti *et al.* 2019). At the same time, it is also important that dialogue become self-sufficient even when it is no longer externally funded.

The question of how these cross-regional dialogues could address—from a short- or long-term perspective—bilateral conflict settings, support formal peace processes and provide an impetus for conflict transformation within local societies, can only be answered empirically and case by case, but even then, finding causalities would probably not be possible. Nonetheless, cross-regional formats of dialogue can disturb the hegemonic conflict setting in the long term and they can produce alternative views on what a shared future would look like. Even though the transformative power of cross-regional dialogues among local civil society actors is limited by its context and has only a partial impact on wider societies, this format of dialogue evidently provides a broader room for the participants to strengthen their communication over conflict divides.

Empirical Data

- Field trip to Armenia (May 2018): Ten interviews were conducted with people working in different local NGOs.
- Field trip to Georgia (October–November 2018): Eight different local and international NGOs were contacted, and 12 people were interviewed.
- Field trip to Moldova/Transdniestria (November 2018): 14 interviews were conducted with people working in different NGOs.
- Field trip to Moldova/Transdniestria (February 2019): Seven interviews were conducted with people working in different local and international NGOs.
- Eighteen expert interviews and consultations were conducted between September 2018 and April 2019.
- An experimental dialogue forum, ‘Cross-Regional and Inter-Sectional Dialogues: Developing New Approaches to Support Bottom-Up Peace’, was held on 15–18 April 2019 in Stuttgart, Germany. Twenty participants, including team members, a representative of the OSCE, and local peace-builders from the South Caucasus and Moldova/Transdniestria, attended.
- An experimental dialogue forum, ‘How Can Cross-Regional Dialogues Support the Transformation of Intractable Conflicts?’, was held on 29 October 2019 in Vienna, Austria. Eighteen participants, including team members, representatives of the OSCE and the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), and local peace-builders from the South Caucasus and Moldova/Transdniestria attended.

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