



**Dialogue  
Support**

**in  
Ukraine**

A “Lessons Learned” Paper

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Note: This paper contains the personal views of the contributors and does not represent the view of CSSP or Inmedio.

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## INTRODUCTION

CSSP – Berlin Centre for Integrative Mediation (CSSP) and Inmedio – Institute for Mediation, Consulting and Development (Inmedio) have been engaged in dialogue support in Ukraine since November 2014 (in 2014 and 2015 together with the Center for Peace Mediation). The latest project (August-December 2017) involved original local partners – Odesa Regional Group for Mediation (ORGM) and new Kyiv partners – Ukrainian Centre for Nonviolent Communication & Reconciliation (Dignity Space).

The project - **Dialogue support in Ukraine: tackling deeper layers of inter- and intra-community conflicts** - was funded by ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) with resources provided by the German Federal Foreign Office. It gave an opportunity to engage with those in the Ukrainian civil society interested in developing dialogues, including professional facilitators, as well as supporting our Ukrainian partners to organise and run dialogue processes.

Hoping to learn from our experience and to promote reflective practice in the dialogue and peacebuilding field, we present this Lessons Learned paper. It is based on contributions from our Danish / Ukrainian colleagues – Dignity Space – as well as from our Berlin partners – Inmedio.

The main themes that arose in the reflections firstly concern the development of the professional community of dialogue actors in Ukraine<sup>1</sup> and secondly, the impact of dialogue initiatives on the various conflicts affecting Ukrainians.

Dignity Space share their experience training Peace Engineers and lessons learned while

helping to resolve community conflicts through nonviolent communication. They propose several important conditions for the development of dialogue processes in Ukraine. Inmedio elaborate further on the potential development of a dialogue culture, analysing resistance faced by dialogue initiatives and outlining five key recommendations.

The discussion at the end draws together the lessons learned, elaborating on a few of the core issues, and suggests several approaches that future projects could take in order to support the development of both the professional community of dialogue actors as well as a culture of dialogue in Ukraine.

## DIGNITY SPACE<sup>2</sup>

We wish to share our perspective on the status of the dialogue culture in Ukraine. We will focus on two areas of dialogue: first, in relation to building local capacity in the country to enable Ukrainians to facilitate dialogues at different levels of society; and second, in relation to Ukrainians receiving foreign dialogue facilitation support.

Dialogue is a proven efficient, cost-effective way to support conflicting parties to find common ground, build trust, reconcile previous experiences of violence and agree upon cooperative solutions for the future. When dialogue for various reasons is not applied by the conflicting parties as a tool to build cooperation, it can be highly beneficial to engage one or more skilled dialogue facilitators who can enable the parties to leave behind hostility and restore dialogue.

In the following assessment we use our experiences working in Northern Europe as a reference when evaluating our experiences of working with dialogue facilitation in Ukraine.

### **Context**

Ukrainians are fundamentally lacking a culture of dialogue as a preferred and conscious choice to address and solve conflicts. Instead, conflicts are commonly handled by the “lead authority” that then dictates decisions. Often violent conflicts emerge when people fight to gain the power associated with such authority. These mechanisms penetrate deeply into daily life in Ukraine and include family life, workplaces, decision-making processes in NGOs, and both regional and national politics. The results are either un-resolved frozen conflicts that inhibit development, or violent destructive conflicts in which people and values suffer, are destroyed or killed. In both

cases the end result is malfunctioning undeveloped communities not serving the needs of people.

This can easily be tracked back to the rule of communism and the general oppression of free speech and religion in Ukraine, with the 'Holodomor' (man-made famine) as a prime – and still traumatic – painful example of that.

For those reasons Ukrainians simply carry a lot of internal trauma, which they, to their best abilities, seek to suppress for lack of safe and constructive ways to handle it.

### **Our experience with the capacity building of Ukrainian dialogue facilitators**

We are working extensively on building local dialogue capacity, and we have learned a few key lessons from that work. For our programs we apply rigorous tests and psychological screenings in order to select the most suitable Ukrainians to become students to learn dialogue facilitation in our full-time 1-year learning programs (School of Peace Engineers).

Selected candidates are highly motivated and dedicated Ukrainians that are passionate about learning the skills of dialogue facilitation in order to support peace, reconciliation and development in Ukraine. They understand the value of dialogue facilitation the urgent need for their communities to receive skilled dialogue facilitation support. Most of them manage to learn the technical tools of dialogue facilitation fairly well.

However, we estimate that around 2/3 of them are traumatised to a degree where it becomes a significant obstacle for them to embrace and adopt the actual culture and personal mindset of dialogue facilitation. This shows in their lack of fundamental trust that strangers will not exploit them and a general sense of danger in inter-personal relationships

when confronted with people that disagree with them. Disagreements trigger an unproportionally strong knee-jerk reaction of either freezing, fleeing or fighting to defeat the perceived threat, and either way it escalates tensions and inhibits a dialogue-based resolution to the disagreement, which thus represents a sharp contrast to a “dialogue mindset-based” reaction.

In our experience it takes a vast amount of trauma healing to reduce these knee-jerk reactions and work towards establishing a dialogue mindset.

These dynamics present a major challenge in our training programs when supporting the participants in reaching a sufficient skill level in dialogue facilitation.

### **Our experience as dialogue facilitators**

As a paradoxical opposition to these experiences of capacity building of local capabilities we are amazed and also bewildered by how well Ukrainians have received our offer of serving them as dialogue facilitators. We experience open doors and people welcoming us warmly wherever we go in our capacity as dialogue facilitators. People open up to us and inform us about their situation. During the dialogue meetings they speak up about their concerns and show remorse and regret by their own acts of hostility, mistakes or obstruction to an extent where it triggers mutual compassion and willingness for cooperation. In their feedback to us they express high appreciation and relief from the positive results of our dialogue facilitation efforts. Our facilitation effort in Sieverodonetsk<sup>3</sup> is a concrete, but also unusual ideal example of just that.

We believe that we reach these results because of a series of interconnected conditions:

1. Most important of all: Ukrainians are acutely longing for peace, ease, community and cooperation. They are exhausted from internal fighting and thus really value support to decrease or put an end to hostilities.
2. Our skill level as facilitators - all our staff working directly with dialogue facilitation are highly skilled communicators with years of professional experience as dialogue facilitators in different capacities.
3. Our team combination of a foreign dialogue facilitation specialist working in a pair with a Ukrainian specialist. The foreigner has extensive experience in the field, and also seems to be trusted easier by local interlocutors simply because he is a foreigner from a Scandinavian EU country. The local head of our NGO “Dignity Space” is a specialist in Governmental and Public Relations and also has solid expertise in dialogue facilitation as an “inside mediator”. The combination of the foreign and local specialists seems to us to be close to ideal for the composition of a dialogue facilitation team engaging directly on the ground.

We believe that it is the combined relationship of these three specific factors above that leads to our positive experiences working as dialogue facilitators in Ukraine.

### **Our conclusion**

Many Ukrainians are themselves very well aware of the importance of establishing effective dialogues in the country. They understand how events in the last 100 years of the country’s history have disabled a sound culture of dialogue-based cooperation that helped to develop Ukraine. They embrace and

welcome skilled dialogue facilitation when it is offered, and when looking into the mirror they are painfully and humbly aware of their own inability to engage efficiently in dialogues. Ukraine as a society at all the levels is over-ripe in relation to receiving dialogue facilitation support. People's need for skilled dialogue facilitation seems extremely difficult to address at the present time.

We believe that Ukraine will develop toward more economic growth, stronger democratic institutions and enhanced social welfare proportionally with the extent that all levels of communities in the country are actively supported to solve disagreements through dialogue.

## INMEDIO<sup>4</sup>

Many dialogue initiatives have come into being in Ukraine since 2014. A lot of them have built on the professional community of mediators in Ukraine originating in the 1990s. International donors and multilateral organizations have funded trainings, conferences and networking events focusing on dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Successful dialogues<sup>6</sup> have taken place and a community of highly qualified dialogue facilitators exists.

CSSP and inmedio have supported dialogue training, strategising and networking in Ukraine in collaboration with the Odessa Regional Group for Mediation (since 2014) and Dignity Space based in Kyiv (since 2017).<sup>7</sup> We take this opportunity to summarise the lessons learned, challenges and recommendations.

The idea of dialogues for peacebuilding faces a lot of resistance in Ukrainian society as soon as the dialogues are supposed to include individuals or organisations who hold unconventional views on Ukrainian identity, the conflict in the East of Ukraine, politics vis-à-vis Russia etc. They are quickly stigmatised as 'pro-Russian' or 'anti-Ukrainian.' Dialogue is then criticised as something which undermines Ukrainian unity and its ability to defend itself, something which shifts the focus away from containing Russian aggression and propaganda. Dialogue activists on the contrary argue that risking to give certain groups in society the sense of being marginalised and stigmatised has a dangerous effect on social cohesion and creates the breeding ground for violent extremism.<sup>8</sup> However, in light of the existing resistance, it is not farfetched to say that dialogue supporters may have good reasons for security concerns not only for their allegedly 'pro-Russian' participants but also for organisers and facilitators.

Based on our joint activities, observations, conversations with relevant actors and available research we make the following recommendations for the Ukrainian Dialogue community, INGOS and international donors:

- 1.) Make more efforts to better promote the already existing successes and potential of dialogue. This requires proper collaboration between different NGOs and actors in the dialogue field which also touches on the issue of competition.
- 2.) Better link local dialogue activities (track 3) with the national and political levels (tracks 1 and 2), which is a delicate matter because progressive civil society in general mistrusts the political system and fears being exploited by political actors.

- 3.) Elaborate more on the nexus between dialogue and peacebuilding. In other words, to develop clearer strategies on what the peacebuilding impact of dialogue is supposed to be (Theory of change) and what types of dialogue are mostly needed in order to achieve this.
- 4.) Make use of the 'insider-partial' mediation model to enable more inclusivity of dialogues.
- 5.) Create an infrastructure for dialogue which links acute needs on the local level with existing resources, that is, capable dialogue facilitators and funds.

Recommendation 1.) Apart from 'advertising' the successes of one's own NGO, few attempts have been made for **joint campaigning for dialogue**, directed to the broader public or decision-making level. However, this is essential to creating a broader impact. A powerful way to achieve this is to report success-stories and to ask those who benefitted from dialogues to share their experience, using all types of media and art forms. Competition may be one of the reasons why this hasn't happened sufficiently. Competition between NGOs is natural (as it is between INGOs and even donors) yet ways have to be identified to manage competition constructively so cooperative activities like joint advocacy for the common cause remain possible. Funding of results-oriented collaborative action (like producing joint brochures, documentaries etc.) could create incentives for a constructive discussion between the NGOs and initiatives.

Recommendation 2.) A **multi-track approach** is generally seen as important in peacebuilding, linking activities on different levels of society (the so called 'tracks') in order to maximise

impact. In Ukraine, only a few links between local track 3 dialogue initiatives and track 1 or 2 have been made<sup>9</sup> and only a very limited number of (I)NGOs engage with the political level. Many are suspicious and think that it is not worthwhile and even risky to work with/in an endemically corrupt system. However, it is hard to see how dialogue is supposed to trigger a broader change in society without at some point engaging with national politics. Some promising experience/entry points exist and should be built upon for future activities. E.g. the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers has issued Decree No.8,<sup>10</sup> which, amongst other things, promotes the idea of "people's diplomacy" to establish dialogue between Ukrainians living on either side of the contact line. Civil society actors hardly expect a serious follow-up on that. Nevertheless, it should still be used as an entry point to engage political actors in a discussion about establishing a culture of real dialogue in Ukraine.

Recommendation 3.) Dialogues do not necessarily have a peacebuilding effect. Various research from international peace processes show, that dialogue efforts often fail because of a lack of a clear strategy of how the dialogue needs to be designed and linked with other activities in order to feed into broader changes ('Theory of change').<sup>11</sup> In Ukraine, one can observe many 'dialogues about dialogue' among more or less like-minded people, which fall short of engaging with 'the other.' Partly because of improper 'parachuting' funding frameworks, we furthermore see a lot of unsustainable one-off activities.<sup>12</sup> We even observe contradictory approaches within the community of dialogue-supporters: "For some peace comes after victory," as one Ukrainian colleague put it. All of that indicates a need for a deliberate reflection of the **strategic nexus between dialogue and peacebuilding**.

Recommendation 4.) In light of the existing polarisation of Ukrainian society, one cannot



expect a single dialogue-actor to be neutral or seen as neutral when it comes to fundamental (political) beliefs. This is one of the reasons why it is difficult for dialogue organisers to reach out to all relevant sides and facilitate inclusive processes. A promising way to tackle this challenge is the so-called **'insider-partial' mediation approach**: To build teams of mediators/dialogue facilitators who are not neutral as individuals, leaning towards different views, but still able to cooperate as mediators so, as a team, they can be seen as being balanced. Intense team-building and trust-building work is needed to enable this type of cooperation which can also serve as a role- model for others.

Recommendation 5.) A need for dialogue usually does not lead to a request – it is rather a 'dormant'<sup>13</sup> need. This is because people affected by local conflict in most cases are not aware of the potential of dialogue nor where and how to get this service. An **infrastructure for dialogue** is needed, meaning a systematic mechanism of connecting the needs on the ground with the existing professionals and flexible quick-response funding mechanisms. **It is our vision for the near future that people involved in local conflicts in Ukraine would not just by coincidence but as a result of proper preparation meet somebody who knows how to quickly bring in dialogue experts. Dialogue support infrastructure can then – within a framework of mechanisms of funding and identifying adequate facilitators for the given conflict – make a difference on the ground and hence convey the experience to people that attempting to understand each other and finding joint agreements is the way forward to overcome conflict.**

## DISCUSSION

We can divide the lessons learned into two themes: the development of the professional dialogue community and infrastructure in Ukraine and the development of a culture of dialogue in the country as a whole. These can be supported by complementary efforts at local, regional and national levels but require long-term, systemic approaches that promote cooperation amongst different initiatives rather than one-off projects.

### Professional community

The community of dialogue actors (including organisers and facilitators) consists of NGOs and individuals who more or less know of each other and sometimes cooperate<sup>14</sup> but still seem to exhibit distrust, competition and tensions that limit the cohesiveness and growth of the community. It is debatable whether more cooperation and transparency would benefit the dialogue community or whether initiatives should be left to the 'free market'. However, past projects have shown that there is at least a clear need for better coordination of efforts and exchange of experiences.<sup>15</sup> Better coordinated donor support and project activities could fill gaps in the community's needs and help it to develop more efficiently, while leaving initiatives free to pursue their own niche interests.

Dignity Space have also begun to address the crucial need to find and prepare more Ukrainians with the passion and potential to grow the professional community of dialogue actors who can gradually gain the skills and professionalism mentioned earlier as a crucial factor in dialogue success. The need for supervision and 'internships' is also important here to allow the new dialogue actors to gain

confidence and experience while supporting the more experienced ones from burning out.

As mentioned by Inmedio, sharing success stories, especially in a collaborative way, can help to not only promote dialogues nationally and internationally but to raise more awareness within the professional community, thereby strengthening it.

### **Dialogue Infrastructure**

As discussed by Dignity Space, many community conflicts in Ukraine are very ripe for dialogues. They simply need a small catalyst in the form of some experienced dialogue professionals to create a safe space for people to be able to talk constructively. Many conflicts, of course, will be much less ripe and will require much more careful and thorough preparation before people will be ready to engage in dialogue. However, the ripe conflicts can already provide the very useful experience for all involved, including possible success stories.

As outlined by Inmedio, in order for local conflicts to be addressed through dialogue, there should be some dialogue infrastructure that could effectively react to an emerging need. At the moment, conflict interventions seem to only happen in an ad-hoc manner through informal connections or through short-term projects, which usually leave the community hanging without further support. Building the conflict management skills of local dialogue actors and then connecting them to a national dialogue support network could provide the needed conflict monitoring and early-response infrastructure to address ripe conflicts and manage ripening ones.

A dialogue infrastructure could also involve a stand-by team of facilitators who could be deployed to work with local dialogue actors to prepare a process and to then facilitate it.

One major topic that has been raised by both Dignity Space and Inmedio is the potential role of outsider facilitators and whether an insider/outsider combination could provide useful omnipartiality that might be difficult for Ukrainians alone to achieve, given that each Ukrainian is personally affected and involved in the conflict dynamics in the country to some extent. On the other hand, outsiders may not have the deep knowledge of local issues and nuances to really gain the trust and respect of local communities, which is when an insider co-facilitator could provide the needed support. Overall, the potential benefit of outsider facilitators shouldn't be ruled out and they can be engaged if their involvement is deemed useful and appropriate for a particular conflict.

### **Culture of dialogue**

There is quite a common tendency in Ukrainian conflict contexts to quickly determine whose side someone is on and whether that person can be trusted, e.g. by asking "Whose is Crimea?". Fence-sitting can raise suspicions and make it difficult to engage people in dialogue, yet choosing sides is a characteristic of heated conflicts and confrontational debate. Hence, it is so important now to keep promoting a culture of dialogue, where people are not attacked for their positions and there is at least a willingness to try and understand someone with a very different perspective.

As pointed out by academic research,<sup>16</sup> there is often a very strong negative reaction in Ukraine to any views that are not in line with the official, often quite tough, government position, not to mention the more radical positions that see military victory as the only alternative. To develop a culture of dialogue, a tolerance to "other" views must be promoted, while respecting the strong emotional reactions they may elicit. It is a fine line to

balance between suppressing free speech and legitimising polarising views and propaganda.

**Increasing impact**

Finally, as discussed by Inmedio, better links need to be established between various levels (local, regional, national and international) for dialogues to have a more systemic impact and stronger support. Regardless of different theories of change, dialogues need to become more systematic and holistic, fostering constructive relationships between civil

society, local and national authorities, politicians and the various organisations working with conflicts in Ukraine and to promote peace.

It is also important to develop methodologies for assessing the impact of dialogues on participants and communities. This will demonstrate their usefulness, give more tangible feedback to donors and help to fine-tune approaches.



## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of the mediation and dialogue facilitation communities in Ukraine, see T Kyselova, *Professional Peacemakers in Ukraine: Mediators and Dialogue Facilitators Before and After 2014*, 3 *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal* 2017, available online at: [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3054538](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3054538) (accessed 25 February 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Carl Plesner and Olena Hantsyak-Kaskiv, NGO Ukrainian Centre for Nonviolent Communication and Reconciliation “Dignity Space”, <https://www.facebook.com/prostir.hidnosti>

<sup>3</sup> Dignity Space was involved in assisting the Sieverodonetsk City Council with resolving some long-standing political conflicts in the community and passing the City budget.

<sup>4</sup> Dirk Splinter and Ljubjana Wüstehube, Inmedio Berlin – Institute for mediation, consulting, development, <https://www.inmedio.de>

<sup>5</sup> See Dialogue Support Platform ([www.dialoguesupport.org](http://www.dialoguesupport.org)); Mapping of Dialogue initiatives to resolve the conflict in Ukraine. International Center for Policy Studies, Kyiv, 2015 ([http://icps.com.ua/assets/uploads/files/mapping\\_of\\_dialogue\\_initiatives\\_eng.pdf](http://icps.com.ua/assets/uploads/files/mapping_of_dialogue_initiatives_eng.pdf)).

<sup>6</sup> Referring to Kyselova/von Dobeneck, we understand “dialogues as specially prepared meetings between people or groups of people facilitated by a third party with the aim of building mutual trust and/or making a joint decision” (Kyselova, Tatiana/von Dobeneck, Julia (2017): Track III Dialogues in Ukraine: Major Patterns and Resulting Risks. Research-based Policy Paper.

[http://www.peacemediation.de/uploads/7/3/9/1/73911539/track\\_iii\\_dialogue\\_ukraine\\_policy\\_paper\\_cpm\\_kma.pdf](http://www.peacemediation.de/uploads/7/3/9/1/73911539/track_iii_dialogue_ukraine_policy_paper_cpm_kma.pdf).)

<sup>7</sup> The center for peacemediation (cpm) of the European University Viadrina (Frankfurt/Oder, Germany) has been part of this endeavor in 2014 and 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Social cohesion can be seen as (one of) the most important inner-Ukrainian factors for the future development of Ukraine (see e.g. Scenario group Ukraine 2027: Foresight Ukraine. Four Scenarios for the development of Ukraine. Friederich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018: <http://www.fes-vienna.org/e/new-publication-foresight-ukraine>).

<sup>9</sup> See Kyselova/von Dobeneck, *ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> See task #13 in the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine decree #8 (11 January 2017, available in Ukrainian at: <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/ua/npas/249657353>, accessed 25 February 2018.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/sr407-what-works-in-facilitated-dialogue-projects.pdf>; see further the publications of the Reflecting on Peace Practices Project: <http://cdacollaborative.org/cdaproject/reflecting-on-peace-practice-project>.

<sup>12</sup> See Kyselova/von Dobeneck, *ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> See Kyselova/von Dobeneck, *ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the OSCE Project Coordinator online course (in Ukrainian) “How to effectively plan and conduct a dialogue”, which was the result of cooperation amongst several experienced and professional Ukrainian dialogue initiatives: [https://courses.prometheus.org.ua/courses/OSCE/DIAL101/2017\\_T1/about](https://courses.prometheus.org.ua/courses/OSCE/DIAL101/2017_T1/about)

<sup>15</sup> See the reports of the Dialogue Support Platform in Ukraine project: <http://ukraine.dialoguesupport.org/en/reports>

<sup>16</sup> See Kyselova/von Dobeneck, *ibid*.