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# The Boy Who Cried “Dialogue”: Ukraine Reflections

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*Alex Azarov is an associate of MediatEUr, a Brussels-based peace mediation NGO. He is currently working on helping Ukrainians to develop dialogue capacity in dealing with the challenges facing their country.*

*Alex has worked in Australia as a tenant advocate at a community legal centre in Sydney. More recently he worked in Brisbane as a mediator specialising in tenancy disputes, where he was responsible for designing and conducting training sessions on conflict resolution topics such as soft skills, role of emotions, shifting perspectives etc.. He completed an internship at the Queensland Civil & Administrative Tribunal, and has extensive experience conducting research for various Australian academics and mediators into alternative dispute resolution.*

*Propelled by an interest in international affairs in 2013-14, Alex completed an internship at the Moscow office of International Crisis Group, and participated in the ICP/Caux International Summer Academies on Nagorno-Karabakh (2013) and Peace Mediation (2014) which set him on the peacebuilding path that has brought him to mediatEUr. His special interest is in conflicts involving Russia, including those in the Caucasus and Ukraine.*

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In October 2014, I travelled to Ukraine to work on a dialogue project with MediatEUr, a Brussels-based peace mediation NGO. After the project, I continued travelling, visiting Kharkiv, Lviv, Lutsk, Odessa and the Carpathians. It's a wonderful country with soulful, welcoming people, delicious cuisine and a rich mix of geography, architecture and traditions.

Ukrainians have endured a painful history and continue to suffer the terrible effects of corruption and geopolitics. I met many Ukrainians working hard to help those affected by the crisis and making efforts to bridge the divides within their communities. One type of effort that is being mentioned a lot these days is «dialogue». Some constructive dialogues are already being run in Ukraine. However, I got the impression that the term can sometimes be used as some panacea without practical substance behind it.

There is a growing danger that the multitude of dialogue initiatives may lead to dialogue fatigue amongst Ukrainians. That is a distrust of anything called a dialogue and a perception that dialogues are just a waste of time. So I want to dissect this term «dialogue» based on my recent experiences in Ukraine.

What exactly is a «dialogue»? Literally, it means achieving something by way of words. It makes sense to choose dialogue as an alternative to violence and this has been promoted throughout the world. I don't think that there is in practice one particular process that can be called a dialogue. It's broadly understood as people talking to each other, perhaps facilitated by someone else. There are a lot of initiatives now in Ukraine to run dialogues, even to establish a national dialogue. However, the following sections will outline the problems that can arise.

### **«Peace Talks»**

It is a common fact that during violent crises, calls will be made for the leaders of the warring or involved sides to participate in «talks». The Minsk ceasefire agreement signed on 5th September 2014 was the result of such talks. Regardless of this agreement, the violence continued and many people were killed in Eastern Ukraine and more continue to die. Another Minsk

initiative – the OSCE Minsk Group – has been trying unsuccessfully since 1992 to encourage a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

It is important to differentiate such high level initiatives from the term «dialogue». They may involve talks but they are driven by complex, political negotiations and the competing agendas of the participants and even of the mediators. As a result, relationships are not improved and mutually satisfying solutions are not developed. What's worse, people begin to lose hope in talking and turn to the other option - fighting.

### **«Debates»**

There is a strong culture of debate in our societies, from Presidential debates aired widely on television to heated debates in our parliaments. We have been convinced that the people and ideas that are worth our support are those which have been most eloquently and passionately presented. There is value in intellectual debate but it seems that success now comes at the expense of your opponent. As a result, debate is now often adversarial, personal and destructive.

So it is no surprise that when people hear «dialogue» they understand this to mean «debate». When such people attend dialogues, they might rightly believe that they should be the loudest and the most convincing to gain something from the process. Naturally, they will also aim to denounce the 'other side' in some way to ensure their own victory. Clearly, this is not a dialogue and we should differentiate debates from dialogues. I have heard this concern in Ukraine many times – that the political culture of debates is frustrating Ukrainians and must change to a culture of dialogue and collaborative communication.

If the adversarial culture of politics begins to change, it can serve as an excellent example to people for how to communicate to each other. On the other hand, civil society dialogue efforts can develop regardless of politics and can start to influence the culture of political debates.

### **«Bla bla»**

I have unfortunately heard several times this disheartening feedback from people – «there was a lot of 'bla bla' but, as usual, no results». We have the bureaucracy of our institutions, the thousands of hours of meetings, discussions and conferences as well as the numerous well-intentioned peace talks and we still seem to be facing the same violent conflicts around the world, again and again. This can cause disillusionment even for the most pacifistic and conciliatory amongst us so it is understandable when people start to see dialogues as just another «bla bla».

Dialogue should not just be talking for the sake of talking. I think it is crucial to evaluate as accurately as possible what aims the dialogue can achieve before running it. The aims should also be specific enough and achievable. It may not be possible to work out solutions to all problems in one session. So dialogue should give the participants a sense that the process was worthwhile and that they go away having gained something. Otherwise, they might not come back again to yet another dialogue session for just a bit of «bla bla».

### **«Building relationships»**

I believe that at the core of dialogue is simply building relationships. In fact, this can even be achieved without words. Words can sometimes mask or hinder the building of relationships. So if we keep this as the core aspect of dialogues, I think we can avoid a lot of the problems I've discussed above.

It's hard to build relationships with «bla bla». We don't form deep bonds with people based on small talk or pointless conversation. It is when we discuss deep needs and concerns, we start to see each other's humanity, to help each other and to strengthen our relationships. It's also hard to build relationships through adversarial debate. When we're claiming loudly that we are right and that they are wrong, they will not be keen to befriend us. When we show them that we want to work out our problems together, collaboratively, that is when our relationship will improve. To do this, we

must often challenge the concept of the 'other' and see similarities between us and our opponents.

I think that Peace Talks will also only succeed when politicians and diplomats focus more on building relationships, between their countries and their peoples. Relationships based on power politics, fear and violence do not seem to be working. We need to focus on things we have in common, our common challenges. We should celebrate our diversity rather than creating schisms in our societies. We should engage in real dialogues, not peace talks, debates or «bla bla». And if politicians do not lead by example, then it is up to civil society to build relationships from the bottom up and to set the standards for our politicians.