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OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE
AND COOPERATION IN PROTRACTED CONFLICTS



CORRIDORS PROCEEDINGS VOL. I

SEBASTIAN RELITZ – INTRODUCTION

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DOI: 10.15457/cp_1_4-16

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All the protracted conflicts in the former Soviet space have some features in common. They are conflicts over a contested status or statehood of an area with an increased international dimension. Together with the renewed East–West confrontation, the unresolved conflicts around Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Eastern Ukraine fuel the distrust between states and societies in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Both phenomena have become increasingly interconnected over the course of the last 10 years, adding new dynamics and layers to the conflicts. The link between domestic, interstate and great power conflict and the destabilising potential of this process manifested itself during the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 and the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Much trust has been lost between the various actors involved and the rhetoric in public and political discourses has become more confrontational. We are currently facing a situation in which connections between opposing sides remain broken, and the room for dialogue and cooperation is shrinking.

PROTRACTED CONFLICTS IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

Protracted conflicts are not temporary phenomena; rather, they have existed for more than 25 years and have a far-reaching impact on local, regional and international structures of security. They are one of the main obstacles in the development of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Subsequently, they also determine the realities of the daily lives of millions of people and confront the international community with serious challenges (Relitz 2016). Our understanding of the causes, dynamics and interplay of different levels of protracted conflicts remains limited. Protracted conflicts are often portrayed as predominantly ethnic conflicts (Cordell/Wolff 2010; Kaufmann 2001; King 2001). However, recent research has highlighted the limited explanatory power of ethnicity in actual conflict dynamics. To understand the origin and development of protracted conflicts, it is necessary to *“[first look] at the process of fragmentation of political authority and competition for power in contexts of regional and internal political turmoil, contested territories, and divided societies, and second, re-assess the role ethnicity has played in it as a resource”* (Dembinska/Campana 2017, 8). Overemphasising the component of ethnicity often leads to marginalisation of the role of local political and business elites, conflicting language policies, competing cultural as well as historical narratives, and delegitimation and fragmentation of central authority (Smolnik 2016). Many scholars describe the pro-

tracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space as “frozen conflicts” (Bebler 2015; Ortung/Walker 2015). However, the term is very questionable, as it has limited analytical potential and is applied as a political concept. The conflicts themselves are by no means static and frozen (Fischer 2016). The intensity of the conflict and mediation varies considerably over time. In this sense, conflicts are vastly dynamic. Even though the fighting has mostly come to a standstill and a final settlement is often not evident, we can observe multiple dynamics. Recent escalations of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict show that these dynamics can also result in renewed warfare. According to Hallbach (2007), “frozenness” does not refer to the dynamics and intensity of the conflict, but rather to the stagnating process of conflict management and the irreconcilable positions of the conflict parties.

The renewed East–West confrontation fosters analyses with a geopolitical focus. Discourses surrounding protracted conflicts are shaped and redefined in ways that highlight their international dimension. It is true that most protracted conflicts in the area of the EU Eastern Partnership influence and are influenced by, firstly, the geopolitical competition between Russia and the US and, secondly, the conflict between the two competing regional integration projects: the European Union and the Eurasian Union. The discursive and ideological divisions that are currently being drawn between the West and Russia also limit the room for manoeuvring in protracted conflicts (Tamminen/Relitz/Jüngling 2016, 3). Nevertheless, we should not oversimplify the conflicts by marginalising the regional and domestic levels. Protracted conflicts often gain an identity-defining character that leads to segregation and stereotyping of the other. This is due to the zero-sum character of secession conflicts, in which the underlying positions of both sides are incompatible: they perceive the conflicting object – the affiliation of a territory – to be indivisible. Protracted conflicts are complex and run on different levels. They are composed of at least three levels or concentric conflict cycles. These levels – local, regional and international – are interlinked and influence one another (Relitz/Biermann 2017). However, little is known about the complex interdependencies between these different levels.

The current situation regarding the protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet space is characterised by two main findings: (1) the increasing tensions at different levels of conflict, the collective alienation and (self-)isolation of societies, and the shrinking spaces for dialogue and cooperation over the divide, and (2) the narrow understanding of the complex conflict structures and dynamics, the restricted knowledge exchange between the societies in conflict, and the need for new and innovative ideas in respect of dialogue and confidence building. To tackle these issues, I founded (together with former colleagues from the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, IOS in Regensburg, Germany) in 2016 the **CORRIDORS** initiative.

DEVELOPING A CORRIDOR FOR DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION

In the **CORRIDORS** framework, we develop and implement projects that enhance knowledge transfer and create new opportunities for direct people-to-people contact across the conflict divide. In a cross-regional framework, we strive to facilitate cooperation between academic and civil society stakeholders so as to revitalise dialogue between communities. **CORRIDORS** aims to enhance awareness and understanding of the context and dynamics surrounding protracted conflicts in specific regions and on an international level. In this way, **CORRIDORS** combines research and knowledge transfer with dialogue in an innovative way.

CORRIDORS is designed to be a cross-regional and cross-thematic process that can bypass existing structural limitations in bilateral and monothematic frameworks. Based on a needs analysis from civil society actors from the various regions, we identified several issues that are of shared interest. These common interests can serve as thematic spaces which bring actors together in a cross-regional dialogue. The corridor metaphor is used to strengthen the idea of multi-actor, multi-level processes that focus on problem-finding dialogue and practical cooperation. The corridor that we are building has multiple doors to be opened and closed according to local needs. **CORRIDORS** is an open process that connects actors from particular thematic spaces on different levels and in cross-regional and bilateral frameworks. The cross-regional and cross-thematic framework creates new opportunities for dialogue and cooperation in areas identified by the actors themselves, in a way that addresses the specific circumstances in each protracted conflict and their commonalities. In 2017, we implemented the project entitled “Dialogue through Cooperation” (founded by the German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD) in the framework of the East–West dialogue. The project consisted of three main components: a young researchers workshop, three research fellowships at IOS, and this publication.

In early September, we organised the first **CORRIDORS YOUNG RESEARCHERS WORKSHOP** in relation to the obstacles and opportunities for dialogue and cooperation in protracted conflicts. The project brought together 20 young scholars and civil society experts from Central and Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus for an intensive one-week workshop in Regensburg (Germany). The primary goal of the workshop was to promote dialogue and scientific cooperation beyond conflict boundaries and to facilitate knowledge transfer and mutual understanding across the conflict divide. With participants from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Germany, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the regions of Abkhazia and Transnistria, the workshop formed a cross-regional corridor for dialogue through cooperation. The first phase of the workshop emphasised the peer-to-peer introduction, the reduction of

stereotypes and the development of a mutual vision and a secure framework for dialogue. The experienced facilitators – **Andrea Zemskov-Züge** (Berghof Foundation) and **Cécile Druey** (swisspeace) – trained the participants in the fundamental concepts and provided some practical exercises in dialogue. Within the second part of the workshop, the participants presented and discussed their research projects from different professional and regional perspectives. The participants received feedback from their peers, experienced scientists such as **Stefan Wolff** (University of Birmingham) and **Shalva Tabatadze** (Tbilisi State University), and members of the IOS research group “Frozen and Unfrozen Conflicts”. One thematic set of panels addressed the challenges of human rights protection, political participation and education in relation to protracted conflicts. A second thematic focus was on the interplay of domestic and international conflict dynamics, the influence of international actors, and challenges and opportunities for conflict settlement and international engagement. The participants also used the “corridors” of the workshop to discuss a variety of topics, explore further possibilities for cooperation and establish a network of likeminded young scholars and activists.

The **CORRIDORS FELLOWSHIP** offers young and established scholars from conflict-affected societies the possibility of a research stay at IOS. The fellowships aim to reduce isolation through academic exchange and to deepen cooperation between scholars from the South Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and Germany. In 2017, three one-month research stays provided the opportunity for joint learning, knowledge transfer and the further development of collaborative projects. With special emphasis, we addressed the topic of multilingual language education in conflict-affected regions. **CORRIDORS** Fellows **Rustam Anshba** (from Gudauta) and **Shalva Tabatadze** (from Tbilisi) conducted their research on this highly important topic within the framework of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS PUBLICATION

This publication consists of the papers developed and presented by the project participants during the workshop and in the framework of the fellowships. Furthermore, our workshop facilitators provide insights from their work in the field of peacebuilding and dialogue. The publication provides readers with first-hand research from different regions of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Young scholars explore diverse topics connected to the overarching theme of opportunities and obstacles for dialogue and cooperation in protracted conflicts. Thus, the publication contributes to the exchange of knowledge between the regions affected by protracted conflicts, to raising awareness in international discourses, and to further bridging the divide between scholarly and practitioners’ work on protracted conflicts.

As explained above, protracted conflicts are dynamic and have different layers and dimensions which are interconnected. The microdynamics of protracted conflicts was analysed by **David Sarkisyan** (from Yerevan) in his study on the escalation patterns in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Using statistical data on the use of arms from 2010 to 2017, he showed that the conflict is by no means frozen. Rather, multiple circles of escalation alternate with phases of relative stability. Sarkisyan identified escalation patterns and advised international mediators to intensify their activities in the run-up to those risk periods. **Sahib Jafarov** (from Baku) analysed the (trans)formation of group identity in regionally divided ethnic groups. Focusing on the Lezgins, an ethnicity that is divided between Azerbaijan and Russia, he demonstrated that separation by means of state borders poses a significant challenge to the preservation of their unique identity. Besides religion, Jafarov argues that various factors, such as urbanisation, education, and socioeconomic integration, influence perceptions of identity and ethnicity in the Lezgin community. **Yanina Osadcha** (from Kharkiv) explored the complex intersection between different levels of conflict. Analysing the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, she illustrated how increased international intervention escalated and prolonged the armed conflict. She further evaluated how the dynamics of both conflicts are interconnected in light of the renewed East–West confrontation. However, Osadcha did not stop at the international level, and showed how local elites use the strategy of transnationalisation of conflict to attract foreign support. Contested and changing identities play a significant role in protracted conflicts.

The protection of human rights and national minorities is a crucial challenge in many protracted conflicts. This challenge is particularly evident for unrecognised or partially recognised states, so-called de facto states. **Lucia Leontiev** (from Chisinau) examined how international human rights law applies to de facto states. She explained that, despite their disputed status, de facto states have human rights obligations. Because they are not temporary phenomena, the international community must find ways in which to deal with them so as to ensure the protection of human rights. Leontiev argued that the international community should grant de facto states a legal personality in order to make them accountable for human rights violations and strengthen their commitment to the protection of human rights. **Andrei Iovu** (from Chisinau) described the situation of national minorities in Transnistria. He compared the legislative framework and the development of minority rights in the Republic of Moldova and in the de facto state of Transnistria. Iovu argued that Transnistrian legislation is ambiguous and the application of international standards is limited. Based on analyses, he provided explicit recommendations to the (de facto) authorities in Chisinau, Tiraspol, and advocated more cooperation of civil society organisations dealing with minority issues on both sides of the Dniester.

Peacemaking and conflict resolution are very challenging tasks, especially under the structural, socioeconomic and political constraints in protracted conflicts. **Shushan Ghahriyan** and **Anna Atoyan** (from Yerevan) stressed the gender perspective in peacemaking. Based on rich empirical data from Nagorno-Karabakh, they evaluated the potential and constraints of women's engagement in peace processes and women's perceptions of war and peace. The research observed that although women participate in war activities, they place a stronger emphasis on peace, but are largely excluded from the decision-making process. Ghahriyan and Atoyan concluded that inclusive peacemaking requires the engagement of various social groups and stronger participation of women. In contrast, **Anatoliy Dirun** (from Tiraspol) applied an institutional perspective. He summarised the current shortcomings and future possibilities of the development of the political and electoral system of Transnistria. He argued that institutions play an essential role in conflict resolution, as they ensure both the stable development of conflicting sides and the stability of relations between them. Dirun found that the lack of programmatic vision to modernise the political system destabilises the sociopolitical system in Transnistria and negatively affects the Moldavian–Transnistrian settlement process. **Nataliia Haluhan** (from Kiev) aimed to define a specific obstacle for peacebuilding processes in protracted conflicts. In her contribution, she extends the concept of spoilers in peacebuilding processes of protracted conflicts. Using the Ukrainian case, she evaluates how the concept of spoilers can be applied to powerful state actors. Haluhan found that the traditional concept of spoiling has to be further developed so as to adequately address the domestic, transnational and international levels in protracted conflicts. A further developed conceptual framework of spoiling behaviour will enable peacebuilders to identify and address all parties in the conflict. Haluhan's contribution makes a first step in that direction. Even when power-sharing arrangements have been made, a functioning mechanism for regional autonomy is not certain. **Elena Antohi** (from Cahul) illustrated this in her research into the centrifugal forces in asymmetric power-sharing arrangements in interethnic conflicts. In her case study on the autonomous region of Gagauzia in Moldova, she identified three main obstacles in the successful implementation of power sharing: socioeconomic competition, domestic power struggles, and geopolitical rivalry. Antohi drew a comprehensive picture of the lack of political will on both sides and the various informal practices that prevent efficient implementation of Gagauz autonomy.

Domestic and international civil society organisations can build alternative spaces and processes for dialogue and cooperation in protracted conflicts when official interactions are limited. **Cécile Druey** (from Bern) revealed the role of civil society in the process of peacebuilding in the post-Soviet space. She argued that civil society could play a crucial role in bridging the frictions between official and unofficial strands of media-

tion and dialogue in order to increase the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts. However, civil society in the post-Soviet space is notoriously weak and under pressure, suffering constraints from nationalist radicalisation, state repression and external donor agendas. **Andrea Zemskov-Züge** (from Berlin) provided a detailed case study on a specific dialogue process. She demonstrated the possibilities and constraints of dealing with the past in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. Focusing on the transitional justice mechanism of truth finding and reconciliation, she outlined the Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue facilitated by the Berghof Foundation. Zemskov-Züge explained the dominant conflict-supporting narratives and the conflicting wartime perceptions in the Georgian and Abkhazian communities. She discussed the possibilities and obstacles of approaching the deadlock of competing narratives, and argued that reconciliation and trust building can be facilitated through constructive dialogue.

Education opportunities and language policies often play a crucial role in the development and escalation of protracted conflicts. Nonetheless, language education can also support bridging the divide and promote social inclusion in conflict-affected societies. In his contribution to this edited volume, **Shalva Tabatadze** (from Tbilisi) outlined the positive effects of mother tongue education and bilingualism in conflict-affected societies. Analysing statistical data on the education system of Abkhazia, he identified major shortcomings in the field of mother tongue education for ethnic Armenian, Georgian and Abkhazian school children. He argued in favour of a developmental approach to education that supports a non-discriminative mother-tongue-based multilingual approach to education for all ethnic groups. This approach should be supported in the international community so as to increase the quality of education and the linguistic tolerance in the region. Similarly, **Rustam Anshba** (from Gudauta) explains that language education in conflict-affected regions can become a tool not only of segregation but also for positive changes, especially in ethnically and linguistically diverse societies such as Abkhazia. He argued that Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE) is a very effective education model that can preserve linguistic diversity, as a cornerstone of identity formation of respective ethnic groups, and promote social inclusion. The paper analysed the current challenges of the education system in Abkhazia and explored challenges and opportunities in relation to how to improve it. The author outlines that MTB MLE in Abkhazia has a great deal of potential and can contribute to overcoming many existing educational challenges and linguistic and ethnic tensions within society.

All of the papers offer a different perspective on the diverse set of obstacles and opportunities for dialogue and cooperation in protracted conflicts. Most importantly, the contributions add the local perspective to a debate that is dominated by Western scholars who sometimes lack in-depth knowledge of the different cases. This publication brought together authors at very different stages of their careers, from recent graduates and early-stage PhDs to postdoctoral researchers, professors and established practitioners. Naturally, some of the articles are more developed than others. Nevertheless, all papers raise awareness of the specific dimensions of protracted conflicts, the challenges for human rights and the obstacles for peacebuilding and conflict settlement. This provides us with a more nuanced picture of the specific structures, elements, dynamics and consequences of protracted conflicts. Meanwhile, the authors also identified opportunities to (re-)establish dialogue and cooperation in respect of the conflict divide. In several contributions to this publication, the potential of more inclusive conflict management has been identified. A special emphasis lay on the role that civil society could play and a more active engagement of women and youth. Lastly, the distinct role of language education and education opportunities was highlighted. Education, knowledge transfer and scholarly cooperation can serve as an opening with which to soften the current deadlocks and to bypass structural barriers to dialogue. The **CORRIDORS** project itself demonstrates the opportunities to facilitate dialogue, knowledge exchange and direct people-to-people contact beyond the conflict divide. I would like to use the opportunity to thank the DAAD and the Federal Foreign Office for their previous and ongoing support. Most importantly, I would like to thank all of the authors and the other participants of the project for their engagement, openness and an inspiring working atmosphere throughout the process. We will continue to build joint learning opportunities for the younger generation and facilitate academic cooperation so as to reduce (self-)isolation in protracted conflicts. Finally, we will also continue to raise awareness and promote academic research in regions such as those featured in this publication.

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Participants of the First Corridors Young Researchers Workshop in September 2017.

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