
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Mediating Dialogues in Ukraine? Part 2 of my Professional Journey

Alex Azarov (Mediator & peace seeker) · Wednesday, May 11th, 2016 · Young Mediators Initiative (YMI)

Recap

Last time I wrote as a young mediator about my mediation path, I had just arrived in Tbilisi, Georgia. It was February 2014, when people began being killed at the Euromaidan on Independence Square in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. I was trying to [‘break into the peacebuilding field’](#) but did not have much success in Tbilisi. There were efforts to introduce mediation into the Georgian judicial system but I was drawn back to my wonderful colleagues at International Crisis Group (ICG) in Moscow.

During another three months with ICG, I began actively following the conflict escalating in Ukraine. I was shocked and increasingly distraught by how a virus of fear, violence and suffering was steadily spreading in Ukraine as a result of yet another geopolitical conflict. As a Russian, I felt frustrated and saddened, deciding that I could not go back to work in Australia if I could instead play a professional role in helping to counteract this madness.

How I got to Ukraine was by being in the right place at the right time - a peace mediation summer academy in Caux, Switzerland. I didn't have to break into anything, just line up for lunch next to the CEO of a Brussels-based mediation and dialogue NGO. Antje offered for me to help with a fact-finding mission in Ukraine. "Sure!", I accepted without any hesitation. "I'm serious!", she replied. "So am I!" said I, not believing my luck.

Fast forward to today. Since June 2015 I've been living in Kyiv and helping our team to build a [dialogue support platform](#), in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme. The aim has been to map dialogue initiatives in Ukraine and the conflict themes arising from the discussions. It hasn't been to run dialogues ourselves but to help develop the capacity of Ukrainian and international initiatives to work with dialogues in the country.

"Dialogues between whom?" people ask. Well, the categorisation of "Pro-European vs pro-Russian" is an extreme oversimplification of the complex internal and external problems for Ukraine. Ukrainians have a multitude of views and positions, some

supporters of Euromaidan, some critical of it; there are many shades of how they feel about the EU and Russia as well as different ways people identify as a Ukrainian. Some of the tensions involve internally displaced persons, host communities, combatants, local authorities, regional authorities and the politicians in Kyiv; all of which are fuelled by the critical socio-economic situation in the country and the armed conflict in the east. People discuss a multitude of topics: decommunisation, decentralisation, reforms, governance, politics, corruption, ideology, identity, history and so on.

Dialogues give Ukrainians a safe space and an opportunity to hear different views, to be heard, to build trust, to develop a common understanding of the problems and to perhaps start to work together on resolving them. There is also an interest in exploring dialogues involving residents of Donetsk and Luhansk [1] as well as dialogues between Ukrainians and Russians.

Mediation and dialogues

One of the things we discovered is that there are professional fields for dialogue and mediation but how they coexist and overlap is uncertain at the moment. For starters, how do you define mediation or dialogue? I've discovered dialogue facilitation methodologies that closely resemble various Western mediation models: facilitative - focusing on empowering parties to work on solutions to their situation (e.g. Technology of Participation); transformative - focusing on transforming the relationship between the participants (e.g. Restorative Circles, Non-violent communication) and even exciting and creative methodologies like Forum Theatre, Fast Dialogues or dialogues between poets, many of which are based on many mediation principles and core skills.

There are also mediation practices in Ukraine that are better known in Western contexts - like business mediation, school mediation, family mediation. There is a National Association of Mediators in Ukraine and yet another attempt at a mediation law currently in the works. Some group processes have also been labelled as mediation, e.g. the Odesa Regional Mediation Group working with community dialogues; and the most visible of all have been the Minsk talks involving the heads of France, Ukraine, Germany, Russia and Belarus, which some also unfortunately call mediation. Many processes get labelled as mediation or dialogues - peace talks, political debates, round tables, forums and so on. The term 'dialogue' gets thrown around a lot and has contributed to dialogue fatigue and disillusionment in Ukraine.

The aims behind the terms

So with only two core terms - mediation and dialogue - and such a complex situation in the country, it may help to explore the aims of the processes being used to provide more clarity for the participants and for the third parties themselves. The following table [2] shows a range of needs that a third party can help participants to satisfy in a process:

To vent and be heard	To start to understand another side, including needs and interests	To build relationships, increase trust and constructive communication	To explore and understand the conflict, including possible solutions	To work on resolving a particular conflict or problem	To strategically plan future interaction or cooperation
Less group cohesion ←			→ Greater group cohesion		

You can see in the table that going from left to right, the level of listening, hearing, constructive communication and trust generally increases, thus increasing group cohesion. The focus gradually moves towards the future and rational problem-solving. This requires a certain level of trust and cohesion amongst the participants, which cannot be forced. The facilitative mediation process is designed to move from left to right on this table and the methodologies I've seen in Ukraine also fit on it, some focusing only on specific parts.

So whatever the methodology and whatever the process is called - mediation or dialogue - it is up to the third party to determine with the participants in advance what their needs are, what process would best suit their situation and what aims the mediator or facilitator can help the participants to achieve. Whether you're a facilitator in a process, a mediator or a Joker [3] this clarity of purpose can ensure that participants choose the right process for them and make the most of it.

To conclude, more research can and is being done on unpacking various methodologies in Ukraine, both in the mediation and dialogue field, as well as on what needs groups in conflict have and how their level of cohesion can change during various communication processes. Clarification of terminology can really help to bring more clarity and integrity to the Ukrainian field of working with conflicts, this being only one of the first attempts. I look forward to writing about this and the successes of the indomitable Ukrainian people in chapter 3 of my professional journey.

[1] These are parts of Ukraine not controlled by the Ukrainian government.

[2] The concept for this scale was developed with my colleague Olena Kashkareva during a UNDP project to support the development of social cohesion in Ukrainian communities. Almost 40 processes were run, fitting into different parts of the scale.

[3] Forum Theatre or Theatre of the Oppressed feature a facilitator called a 'joker' by the originator of the practice. See the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_the_Oppressed

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