



Squeezed between the frontlines

One applicant described the deep split cutting through Ukraine by quoting his father, who used to say: “I am 60% Russian and 40% Ukrainian. If there is going to be a war, I would have to fight from Monday to Tuesday on the Russian side and then go shoot in the opposite direction from Friday to Sunday”.

What are the reasons for this split? How do the Media report on the cleavages dividing Ukraine and tearing Europe apart? What are the possible solutions to this conflict? The answers to these questions are quite different depending on personal, cultural and national backgrounds of the individual asked about it – even in academia. This is why we launched the Peace Talks.

„I see your point, but...“

Under the heading “Exploring Common Ground for Genuine Dialogue: Trilateral Peace Talks between Ukraine, Russia and Germany”, we gathered 30 participants from all countries involved in order to develop a common understanding. The first part of the conference was devoted to conflict management. In order to avoid clashes on a personal level, Msc. Rima Maria Rahal offered a workshop on “resolving interpersonal conflict”. Participants were given a sound and concise introduction to different rhetoric strategies aimed at “dealing with instead of fleeing from conflict”. Participants practiced different methods by taking on different (aggressive vs. deescalating) roles. One of the main findings was that language can escalate or deescalate conflict, and even small reformulations such as striking words like “but” from supportive statements can heavily influence the outcome of an exchange.



How neutral is neutral enough?

On this basis, Ana Bojadjevska from the Berlin Center for Integrative Mediation (CSSP) explained the structures and resources necessary for “political conflict transformation. How can a mediator be neutral in the face of two conflicting parties? It turned out that this is mainly a matter of being perceived as an actor without vested interests that could corrupt the mediator’s goals and thus raise the question about hidden agendas. If a mediator, like Germany, is leaning towards one side in terms of values and goals, “it is very important that this country clearly reflects it’s own position and consciously avoids to take sides in it’s role as a mediator”. Of course, this is a tightrope walk, but given it’s weight in the EU and it’s close ties to Russia and Ukraine alike, Germany seemed to be in a good position to negotiate with both sides.



One cleavage to divide them all

The two workshops are equipped our participants with the tools and knowledge needed for building peace on a personal and inter-state level. In the second part, we moved on to the conference topics: root causes, media coverage and possible solutions. Each panel was led by an external expert and three participants (one from each country) who held a short presentation each.

The first panel was headed by Prof. Irina Busygina who focused on the root causes of the conflict. According to her, the major force behind Maidan was an emerging young intelligentsia with high levels of education and knowledge about protest organization against the background of a weak economy. Further, the very nature of the protest movement ran contrary to Putins tastes: “What you observe in Russia is the phenomenon of one man on top of the hill, directing politics in an authoritative fashion and creating circles of post-soviet subordinate states. The fact that the Maidan movement dared to challenge this worldview provoked a fierce Russian reaction”. At the same time, however it became clear during the discussion that the tragedy unfolded as several cultural, economic and political cleavages overlapped which in the end amounted to one thick line separating the country in two. As foreign policy expert Viktoriia Vdovychenko noted, a significant part of the Ukrainian population has a transnational identity, feeling Ukrainian and Russian at the same time, which was reflected in voting behavior and language preferences. The occupation of Crimea by Russia set a process in motion, that “freezed the Ukrainian part of these mixed identities and made ethnic identities more salient”. The socio-ethnic cleavages existed before the war but became dominant and decisive only through the war itself.

Evil Putin vs. Ill-designed security structure

Next, Jan Meder concisely summarized EU-Russia relations as moving from an asymmetric policy of harmonization to a situation of mutual confrontation as Russia started to reject the EU’s normative approach, and reclaimed its sphere of influence in the Post-Soviet Space. Ukraine is now squeezed between two security organizations, economic models and possibilities of integration, leaving it the



Viktoriia Vdovychenko and Kirill Entin present their views

choice, as Kirill Entin sarcastically noted, “between the devil and the deep blue sea

with the twelve golden stars”, thereby pointing to the usual approach of depicting Russia as an irrational actor fighting for nothing but it’s hurt imperial feelings. According to the Junior Professor, EU-Russia relations lacked mutual trust because both sides continued to disappoint each other: Russia disappointed the EU in terms of its democratic development, the EU disappointed its largest Eastern European partner by lacking initiative on central spheres of cooperation. As a result, both sides continued to push their integration models without talking about the possible pitfalls of such a competition. The EU wants to include post-soviet countries in its political orbit and establish comprehensive free trade areas, while Russia has established a customs union with basically the same goal.



Beating Russia at its own game?

In the second part, Oleksandr Holubov, Journalist at Deutsche Welle, spoke about the framing of the conflict in the media. He noted that detecting outright lies on both sides of the conflict seems increasingly difficult in light of the resourceful Russian propaganda endeavors which are countered by the newly formed Ukrainian Ministry of Information Policy. This “truth ministry” was recently created after a series of critical articles on Ukrainian military operations, and is headed by former chief editor of Poroshenko’s Channel 5. As both, Russian and Ukrainian media outlets have taken an Orwellian turn, the language and strategies used to defame each other is very similar. Law expert Stanislaw Sereda and HSE teaching assistant Luliia Krivosova agreed that “both sides use hate



Roman Melnyk (middle) presenting solutions to the conflict

language, thereby painting a black-and-white-picture, differentiating between “them” and “us”, and focusing on the other side’s wrongdoings. Sereda insisted that we have to take a step back and call both parties what they are: manipulating governments fighting for their ground. At this point, his compatriot Pavlo Fedykovych emotionally disagreed: “If my country is at war, if people are dying, how can I contradict my leaders on some minor points if they are right overall?” With no agreement on this point, the discussion moved on to the

role of Oligarchs in national media structures. Ukraine’s channel 112 was labeled “a good example of a business investment by Oligarchs” since it was clear that its resources couldn’t possibly be the result of a good ad campaign alone. It seemed quite unclear from the discussion, how much control Oligarchs exercise over central media outlets and to what extent wrong information was due to unprofessionalism on the one hand and targeted misinformation on the other. But there was consent that the ongoing propaganda battle could bring about a Ukrainian version of “Nothing is true and everything is possible” and that such a development could pose serious problems once the war is over. Grzegorz Szymanowski brought up the point that different war frames make us lose sight of relevant views and actors: “The cold war frame ascribes agency to Russia and the United States leading a surrogate war, the frame of “fascists illegally taking power in Kiev” denies Maidan it’s legitimate demand for a different political and economic future and the frame of “Russian aggression” takes the separatists out of the picture and denies their grievances”.

Resolving the integration dilemma

Our conference finally moved on to the discussion about possible solutions to the conflict. Professor Peter W. Schulze first outlined his view of Ukraine’s development since the early 90’s, the orange Revolution and the toppling of Janukovych. He said that he had “incredibly sympathy for those aspiring to a better life” at the early stage of Maidan but that by early 2014, “the Mob had taken over”. The “heavenly hundred” had become the Symbol of a movement for freedom inspite the fact that it was quite unclear who actually shot them. Why does Kiev protract the investigations into this incident, why were the trees removed that would have allowed reconstructing the trajectories of the deadly bullets? Professor Schulze cautioned his audience about projecting European wishes into



Maidan and Poroshenko’s government. Poroshenko, he noted, had his own interests, his government its own corruption scandals and his military is party to a war in which it does not only react to but also actively provokes Russia. He summarized by saying: “We have no choice but to implement Minsk by pressuring both sides to adhere to its provisions. We have to show Kiev its limits and get Russia back into the major formats of European economic and security cooperation. At some point, Russia may definitely turn its back towards the G7, and take leave of its European responsibility”. At this point, the younger participants proposed some more visionary approaches. In his presentation, Andreas Emcev asked for a free trade area from San Francisco to Wladiwostok. “TTIP is a good occasion to realize this endeavor, we have to get Russia into this free trade project because ne-sided integration between the EU und Russia will be blocked by the United States and one-sided integration with the U.S. will make us lose Russia”. To this end, the member states of the Eurasian Union should endow their cooperative instrument with a legal personality that can conclude treaties with international partners.

The results of the conference were presented during a “Citizen Forum” at BMW-Foundation Herbert Quandt. Three working groups (one on each topic) that had been formed at the beginning of our conference summarized the points that a mixed group of Ukrainians, Russians and Germans agreed upon during working group discussions. Interestingly, our participants could agree on many points, ranging from the establishment of a common economic space to the strengthening of the OSCE without preconditions. For our external guests from the German Foreign Office, several media outlets, universities and Civil Society organizations, there was quite a lot to discuss with and learn from our participants. Our closing event focused on presenting solutions for a modus vivendi between Russia, Ukraine and the West. Therefore, our guests could learn less about the roots of the conflict than the possible solutions to it. In future conferences, we will ask our participants to more explicitly mention the points that they could not agree upon.

Our Project Partners

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