

Learning from the past to build confidence for the future

Erwan Fouere¹

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¹ Ambassador Erwan Fouere is the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for the Transnistrian settlement process.

It seems that the concepts of reconciliation as well as non-military confidence building measures are in vogue. Drawing on experiences and observations from different situations like Moldova, Northern Ireland and South Africa, what are some of the secrets of success?

Work with your enemy

We need to devote more efforts towards learning from other post-conflict peace processes.

While each conflict is unique and no two peace processes are the same, by looking at other experiences, we can listen, share, and gain a fresh perspective on seemingly insurmountable problems. With this in mind, the Irish Chairmanship organized a conference in Dublin last April entitled 'A Shared Future - Building and Sustaining Peace', where we presented the experience of the Northern Ireland peace process.

I still have a vivid memory of all the Northern Ireland political parties travelling to South Africa in 1997, one year before the Good Friday Agreement marked the beginning of a new era of peace. This was a time when the parties from both the loyalist and republican traditions in Northern Ireland did not talk to each other. They travelled on different planes to South Africa and rode on different buses. However, it was the message conveyed by Nelson Mandela when he met with them that made an extraordinary impact - he underlined the necessity 'of working with your enemy if you want to make peace with him. Then he becomes your partner'.

Another of the many facets of the South African model of peace building and reconciliation relates to the critical role of women in the process. During the apartheid years, women were in the forefront of the struggle both at national and local level. They continued to play a leading role, some as Members of Parliament in the first democratically elected Parliament. In the Reconciliation process which followed, it was a majority of women who, despite much suffering in the past, took the lead in searching for the truth and offering forgiveness to the perpetrators.

In the context of the Transdniestrian settlement process, we invited the Chief Negotiators from both Moldova and Transdniestria to visit Dublin and Belfast a month ago. During the four-day trip they were able to hear at first hand about the perseverance and patience that the peace process required; and that work must be based on mutual trust and partnership, on an ability to step into the shoes of the other and to view things from the other's perspective. And just last week, we were again brought together at an event hosted by Germany in the beautiful surroundings of a Bavarian village. I am happy to say that delegations from both sides of the river, including Prime Minister Filat and the Transdniestrian leader Shevchuk, all travelled together to the event on the same plane! This in itself sends an important message on the relationship between both leaders. This brings me to my second point relating to the issue of TRUST.

Building trust through dialogue

A vital ingredient for success in any post-conflict peace process is that of building trust between the sides previously divided. This is the 'mortar', the cement that keeps the building blocks together. It needs to be respected - it is very hard to achieve and very easy to damage.

This trust can only be achieved through a process of dialogue between the different sides in the conflict. Facilitators and mediators need to be carefully chosen so that they gain the respect and trust of both sides.

Once trust is established, the chief negotiators and leaders on both sides are more comfortable in making compromises, in taking risks and ‘thinking outside the box’. It also strengthens the sense of ownership with the leaders themselves coming forward with solutions.

It is thanks to the power of dialogue and to the personalities involved in the process that enabled the South African transition from apartheid to a democratic society to be so successful. Very often during the difficult multiparty talks when the country seemed on the brink of tearing itself apart, it was the trust created through dialogue and human relationships that brought the country back from the abyss. I still recall the countdown to the adoption of the new constitution of South Africa in 1996 when the chief negotiators from the two main political parties, Cyril Ramaphosa for the ANC, and Rolf Meyer for the National Party, formally mortal enemies, who were now at one minute to midnight locked in a battle of words over conflicting policies on the lock-up clause and education, having time during a break to search together for the correct lyrics of the Louis Armstrong song ‘A kiss to build a dream on’ ... The success they achieved would never have been possible without that trust which had been established between them.

Reconciliation

For a peace settlement to be sustainable in the long run requires a process of reconciliation - reaching out to both victims and perpetrators in a spirit of forgiveness. However, the path to reconciliation is not an easy one. It is often long and painful; but it is the only way to move from a divided past to a shared future.

Of course, the question arises whether lasting reconciliation can ultimately be achieved without confronting the past. Can reconciliation occur without knowing the truth of the past? And does truth by itself lead to reconciliation?

The approach chosen by countries emerging from conflict has varied considerably. Some have tried, usually unsuccessfully, to brush everything under the carpet with the exhortation ‘forget the past’, ‘turn the page, and start anew’, or launched a process that has little to do with justice and more to do with retribution. This latter approach is sadly the case with the so-called ‘lustration’ laws in a number of Balkan countries.

Others have been more courageous, establishing Truth Commissions, supported by leaders who understood the importance of seeking the truth as part of the healing process and justice for the victims.

South Africa, with its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, offers the most advanced model of reconciliation, focusing as it did not just on truth but also on reconciliation. Its approach was to show reconciliation not as a threat but as an essential ingredient for nation building.

In Northern Ireland, there is still a long way to go before a process of reconciliation can be fully undertaken. But there are significant efforts being made in this direction, such as the transformation of the infamous Long Kesh prison into a Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre with EU funds. The Chief Negotiators from both Moldova and Transnistria during their visit to Belfast were greatly impressed by their meeting with former prisoners from both the loyalist and republican traditions now working together in local community reconciliation projects.

This also underlines that for any reconciliation process to be successful, it must come from the region itself. This is the challenge facing, for example, the Balkan region. However, here too, notable efforts are

being undertaken, such as the 'RECOM Initiative' - a network of civil society organizations advocating the establishment of a region-wide Commission aimed at seeking the truth and promoting reconciliation.

There is no doubt that the OSCE should include the process of reconciliation in its comprehensive approach towards conflict. Without it, the process towards conflict resolution would not be complete.


Involving Civil Society

Underpinning all of the above is the critical importance of involving civil society in conflict resolution and post-conflict peace processes. Again, we can learn from past experiences, such as South Africa and Northern Ireland.

Those involved in the Euro-Atlantic Security Initiative who presented their findings at the Munich Security Conference last February recognized the necessity of engaging with civil society 'to enlist new and as yet largely unused forces as support for building strong security cooperation across the region'. They proposed to supplement traditional negotiations with the use of instruments of civil society.

And in any peace process, the more civil society is involved at the earliest possible stage, the greater the acceptance of the final settlement. This is an approach we are also encouraging in the Transdniestrian settlement process - interaction at grass-roots level will help to overcome the prejudices that have built up on both sides of the Nistru River over the past twenty years. It also helps to highlight the importance of human relationships as opposed to the issue of territory.

This is also an area where the OSCE can play a critical role in fostering confidence-building measures for the benefit of communities from both sides.



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Netherlands Helsinki Committee
Het Nutshuis
Riviermarkt 4
2513 AM The Hague
The Netherlands

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