

## **TEN MYTHS OF A PEACE DIALOGUE**

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A three-year war has inevitably left its mark on the public sentiment in Ukraine, dividing us into those in favor of economic cooperation with the occupied territories and provision of social benefits to our fellow citizens, residing in non-government controlled areas, and into those who oppose it. Not only that, the public opinion has become increasingly divided on the subject of a dialogue as such between citizens from both sides of the line of contact. This is not to mention a thorny issue of cooperation between Russia and Ukraine at the state-to-state level.

It is worth noting that any polarization is a reflection of perceptions taken to extremes. A polarization, honed by prejudice and hardened by warped judgment, gives rise to a myth.

In essence, a myth is a Catch-22 and the danger inherent in the perpetuation of myths lies precisely in their impenetrably closed-circle type nature: on one hand myths feed off propaganda and manipulations and on the other — become a source of such propaganda.

Therefore, it is of paramount importance to debunk myths.

Even more so, when we talk about such sensitive and delicate an issue for Ukrainians as a peace dialogue, its place in current affairs, the role of the state and civil society in it and the urgency of its agenda.

One can confidently speak about 10 myths that exist in Ukrainian society today and influence the public opinion.

### **Myth Number One: Tomorrow Putin will die and Ukraine will blossom**

This is a rose-colored dream of Ukrainian infantilism. As much as one would have liked to believe in such a fairy-tale, fairy stories are generally for children to enjoy. While pressing and complicated issues can be resolved only by adults.

A change of power in Russia does not guarantee a shift in Kremlin's politics towards Ukraine or that it would not become even more aggressive (which is also a possibility).

However, if we want to persist in our wishful thinking let us imagine that a miracle were to happen and Russian liberals came to power. While their stand on the "Ukrainian question" is arguably different from the one espoused by the current government, it hardly coincides with that of Ukrainians. There are several reasons for that, including Russian collective consciousness and electoral processes that inhibit any politician.

So, the question before us is: How do we solve a problem like Russia? Or does anyone believe that Russia will simply disappear from our radar and our borders if we indulge in some witchcraft on the map?

Not likely. Therefore, we must acknowledge the fact that Russia is our neighbor and we are stuck with no leeway to change apartments. By the way, to condition one's own happiness and prosperity on external factors and processes is a tendency fraught with danger. Propensity to victimization will not augur well for us either. We must take responsibility for these matters into our own hands.

Russia, without a doubt, is an aggressor but the question we should be asking ourselves is this: "What should we do to prevent new acts of aggression from occurring in the future?" And all those radical hardliners have to understand that if an interaction stands any chance of success, the idiosyncrasies of the opposing side have to be studied in full. However, such study should not be based on the perceptions which Kremlin spin-doctors attempt to impose on us from our TV screens or official propaganda. Instead, in our quest for understanding the other side we should draw on our communication with real people and embrace real facts, which are arguably more complex than propaganda-created images.

In a dialogue we come into direct communication with real people rather than their TV images and get an opportunity to understand what underpins their convictions, what they really think and how they will act in different situations. The better understanding we get of their worldview the clearer our vision will become as to the course of action we should pursue.

For the sake of argument, had Kremlin spin-doctors truly understood the bedrock on which Ukrainians' worldview is founded, they would have never embarked on the ill-fated *For Novorosiia* project.

### **Myth Number Two: Tomorrow Donbas and Crimea will again be part of Ukraine and all our problems will be solved**

This is another misconception worthy of a child.

To return lands (whether by application of military force or by political means) is easier than to win back the hearts and minds of people and re-establish our cooperation with them. And then, why should we strive to regain territories when their population is openly hostile to us?

The fact that amid people who reside in the occupied territories not everyone is dead set against Ukraine does not change anything because the animosity espoused by the other part can still prevail, "rule the roost" so to speak, and significantly influence the public sentiment.

Of course, we are aware that hostile attitude towards Ukraine is the work of Russian propaganda. But which fears and expectations of these people do Russian spin-doctors exploit to engender in them such vitriol? Why does it work with some people but fails to infuse others? What can be done to offset its pernicious hold?

In the information age it is impossible to simply cut off the information channels, at least not in the way it was done in the Soviet times. Objectively speaking, Ukraine does not have resources for it anyway. Therefore, to reach success on this front we should rely on asymmetrical information strategies but it takes someone with a nuanced understanding of these processes to elaborate such strategies.

A dialogue provides us with a basis for that understanding that can serve as a starting point for the elaboration of the state reintegration strategies. Besides, ***communication from person to person*** is a good example of such asymmetrical communication channels of influence. Furthermore, it is the public diplomacy aimed at reviving ties between people that will stand us in good stead for their ultimate comeback.

### **Myth Number Three: Dialogue is for “peace-making”**

A dialogue may result in a set of recommendations for decision-makers but a dialogue does not envisage the elaboration of a joint position.

International practice shows that one can only start talking about reconciliation with a new generation that has not witnessed a military phase of a conflict.

In the meantime, with the current generation, we can discuss ways to de-escalate the conflict.

The Ukrainian-Russian dialogue or a dialogue between Ukrainian activists and people who reside in non-government-controlled areas cannot in itself lead to “peace-making” as no conflict can be resolved or extinguished before ways have been found to accommodate the interests of the parties or to transform them. So a dialogue is intended to find more subtle and inclusive ways to settle the interests of different groups of stakeholders.

### **Myth Number Four: Dialogue is outside of Ukraine’s legal framework**

If [Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine # 8-p from 11 January 2017](#) is anything to go by, a dialogue between people residing on both sides of the line of contact is far from being prohibited and is actually highly encouraged. Even more so, such dialogue is considered to be a part of the state policy in relation to certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine where state authorities temporarily do not exercise their powers.

In particular, paragraph 13 of the Action plan recommends: “*encouraging the public diplomacy to support an ongoing dialogue between people living on both sides of the contact line*” as well as “*engaging international organizations with expertise in mediation to encourage peaceful settlement of conflicts, starting a dialogue among people living in non-government controlled areas and people residing in government controlled areas*”.

Furthermore, the Action plan envisages the engagement of “*the youth and women in the civil movement through programs promoting their role of peacemakers, support for civil society organizations that encourage structured dialogues and tolerance*”.

Therefore, in engaging in a dialogue the civil society acts directly under the orders of the Government and provides the latter with material to report on the progress in the implementation of its initiative.

Last but not least, the inclusion of women in these processes constitutes an integral part of the [National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council resolution # 1325 on Women, Peace and Security to 2020](#).

### **Myth Number Five: Dialogue means negotiation**

Dialogue is not a process of negotiations because sides involved in a dialogue are not expected to come up with some sort of decision for its further implementation.

During negotiations parties seek to convince each other in the rightness of their approach and sway others into making a decision that will be most favorable to the first party. More often than not, parties approach a process of negotiations from the standpoint of a competition.

The primary aim of a dialogue, however, *is to clarify a position of the other side* as to gain better understanding of the factors that underpin this or that position, as well as of the fears and expectations behind it. A dialogue is not intended to convince others in the rightness of one side's perspective, on the contrary, it seeks to acknowledge different approaches and enable sides to see what they can do given their differences to defuse the acute phase of a conflict.

Therefore, the distinct difference between a dialogue and a process of negotiations is this: the first one is intended to gain a better understanding of the different perspectives involved in a conflict while the second one is geared towards winning.

### **Myth Number Six: Peacemaking is nothing more than a cessation of fire**

The term *peacemaking*, which generally refers to the peaceful settlement of conflicts, is often used to describe activities aimed at putting an end to conflicts and restoring peace.

International practice distinguishes between four types of peace-making activities which were aptly defined by Mr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the former UN Secretary-General, in his 1992 report [An agenda for peace](#). In particular, the diplomat drew a distinction between *preventive diplomacy*, *peacemaking*, *peacekeeping* and *post-conflict peacebuilding*.

However, in Ukraine under the influence of Russian propaganda the concept of *peacemaking* has been significantly narrowed in the public mind to its false interpretation as that of *peacekeeping* while in the most extreme cases it is perceived as a substitute for *peace enforcement*. In persisting in our simplified interpretation of these terms, we lose sight of one of the most complicated and enduring aspects (if not, the most) of post-conflict peacebuilding which relates to engaging conflict-affected communities at different levels with a view to resolve the underlying causes of conflict and prevent relapse into violence.

Successful implementation of these components leads to *sustainable peace* which means that [systemic] balance of interests has been reached which makes the resurgence of conflict unthinkable and inexpedient.

Peace dialogues fulfill their role precisely at the post-conflict peace-building phase and seek to build sustainable peace, including in the aftermath of hostilities.

At the same time, we have to bear in mind that the concept of *peace* is wider than a mere cessation of fire. We do not attain peace immediately after the cessation of hostilities. Hence, the objectives behind peace dialogues are forward-looking: they encompass the issues of today as well as those of tomorrow.

### **Myth Number Seven: Amidst conflict between countries it is impossible to maintain contacts at the civil society level**

When it comes to conflict resolution the official diplomacy is widely considered to be the most traditional and well-known means for peaceful settlement of conflicts. Indeed, the official diplomacy, or *track one diplomacy* as it is sometimes called, is regarded to be the primary peace-making tool of a state's foreign policy which is carried out by diplomats, high-ranking government officials, and heads of states and is aimed at influencing the structures of political power.

But there are cases such as a hybrid war that limit the capabilities of the official diplomacy. Take the Minsk format for a moment – in essence, it is a hybrid semi-official negotiation process because it does not include the official representatives of the Ukrainian government. Of course that was done with the singleness of purpose to prevent further legitimization of representatives of certain areas of Donetsk oblast (CADO) and certain areas of Luhansk oblast (CALO) in the eyes of the international community.

In addition to those formats, there are capabilities of the unofficial diplomacy or *track two diplomacy* that we can tap into.

The unofficial diplomacy refers to informal interaction between members of opposing groups or nations with a view to develop strategies, to influence public opinion, organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict.

Track two diplomacy is by no means a substitute for track one diplomacy but rather compensates for the constraints imposed on leaders by the expectations of their respective constituencies. Furthermore, track two diplomacy was designed to complement the endeavours pursued through the channels of the official diplomacy.

Peace dialogues take place precisely at the track two diplomacy level. They are widely recognized as a useful peace-making tool, especially at the time of conflicts. Their strength lies in the fact that such dialogues can encompass different societal sectors and issues ranging from business, sports, religion, non-government organizations to gender.

### **Myth Number Eight: Russia's civil society acts only on the advice of the Government structures**

This is a dangerous generalization along the lines of “one size fits all” approach.

While it is true that the capabilities of Russian civil society are incomparably low to those of Ukrainian civil society, there are still people in Russia who do not subscribe to the views promoted by the Government. Otherwise, there would not have been one-person protests. The risks these people are taking are significantly higher because they stand to lose their freedom, health and in some cases even life. Besides, their family members are not free from these risks either.

People who will take part in Ukrainian-Russian dialogues will be the people who want to get to the bottom of what is really happening and dialogues will afford an opportunity for them to get a first-hand account.

It is all too easy to point accusing fingers at Russian civil society for their perceived failure to act and bring about a democratic change. By doing so, we devalue the work of all those people who in spite of the overwhelming odds strive to do something. By devaluing the work of such people we play into the hands of Kremlin spin-doctors.

Furthermore, in several cases the interaction with Russian civil society is our only way to learn about real state of affairs in non-government controlled territories or in Crimea, especially when it relates to human rights or Ukrainian political prisoners.

[The Crimea field mission](#), consisting mostly of Russian human rights defenders was the sole channel of information on human rights violations in Crimea. It is noteworthy, that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Ukrainian human rights advocates and international organizations relied on its reports for information on the adherence to human rights in the area.

### **Myth Number Nine: Russian civil society organizations are financed exclusively from the State budget of the Russian Federation (RF)**

It is true that Russia has virtually banned direct financing of its civil society organizations from abroad, because in accordance with its legislation those in receipt of such aid become “foreign agents”.

However, there are alternatives to being financed from the State budget or receiving direct financial assistance from international donors and there are organizations in the RF that seek to bypass the hurdles imposed by the legislation. In the interest of their safety we will not go further into this.

At the same time, we suggest that all those wishing to learn more about this topic pay a visit to the Press Archives Museum and find out how for example during the Cold War different anti-Soviet campaigns were conducted and supported in Ukraine.

**Myth Ten: Dialogue can only take place after Russian side expresses its “repentance” and publicly admits to committing acts of aggression**

Putin’s punitive apparatus works with a precision worthy of a better cause. For example, publicly disputing Crimea’s territorial status as a part of the Russian Federation is fraught with criminal liability and real prison sentence.

So, are we interested in having those civil society activists who conduct their human rights or peacekeeping activities in the face of Russia’s undemocratic processes imprisoned tomorrow? Similarly, it is in our interest that those brave men and women leave the country? If so, we should carry on with our demands that they should publicly acknowledge Russia’s aggression and annexation of Crimea. To do so is a sure way to win Putin’s plaudits.

Furthermore, people engaged in human rights or peacekeeping activities in Russia for sure do not bear personal responsibility for what has transpired. Far from it, they are like the last of the Mohicans who are at least trying to do something to change the situation. Among them there are those who feel their personal responsibility for what has happened most acutely. In a way they feel a sense of guilt.

But they lack a public platform to talk about this and it is the gap that a dialogue can fill in: a dialogue will give them an opportunity to express their sentiments to those of Ukrainians who are willing to listen.

Let us not forget that collective responsibility exists only in totalitarian systems while in our country we seek to build the exact opposite.