

Non-violence in violent times?

On 25.03.2022 around 25 academy alumni and friends came together to share and exchange on the topic 'Non-violence in violent times'

The X-change was conducted amidst the backdrop of escalated direct violence in different parts of the world (aggression in Ukraine, re-capture of Afghanistan by the Taliban, violent repression of civil resistance after the coup in Myanmar, among others). The alumni present during the exchange reflected on the following questions:

- *What do such situations do to us in the peacebuilding discourse and to us as peacebuilders?*
- *What ideas are there for finding a healthy, constructive way to deal with these happenings?*
- *Reflecting on our role, how do we deal with escalated level of direct violence?*
- *What can peace work achieve, especially in these situations?*
- *How can we (continue to) support strengthening the civil society in such an event?*

The following text contains the take-aways, comments and remaining questions.

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We would like to specially thank our Alumni that lived and worked in Ukraine, and that had time to be with us and share their expertise with us from up close.

Confronting emotions, tensions dilemmas and questions

The dominant emotions present were: confusion, frustration, anger, worries, but also hope. We could also recognize that there was tension and dilemmas in the room, we did not end with answers shared by everyone. Each and every person brought with them their own positions, perceptions and dilemmas, e. g. being torn between believing in pacifism while at the same time recognizing that a state has the right to defend its borders and citizens (referring to the war in Ukraine). Some provoked that peacebuilders are not doing enough to deescalate the situation, some have called for a radical re-thinking of peacebuilding strategies, some even doubt that in the case of Ukraine, non-violence is the answer. There are no easy answers to these dilemmas and from the beginning we recognized that this will continue on and should be part of our ongoing reflection of the role of peace workers in violent conflicts. Some open questions towards the end were:

- *How can we engage with civil society in Russia, are we getting active enough there?*
- *Can we be impartial? Should we be?*
- *Can we condemn actions from one of the actors and potentially limit our options in building peace with this actor?*
- *How can we become active from outside of the conflict?*
- *What non-violent approaches and strategies could we adopt that would win more broader support?*
- *Are peace organizations catalyst of civil resistance or spoilers?*

Practical approaches and ways of dealing with violent conflicts in general and specifically for Ukraine

It was discussed that, for us as peaceworkers, it is important not to tie ourselves to one side of the conflict, but to be open to peaceful engagement with actors on both sides.

Furthermore, the difference between peacebuilding and peacemaking was mentioned. Some alumni felt, that we are currently not in a situation where peacebuilding is possible, but we can still put our energy into peacemaking, and need to ask what we can do to reduce or prevent violent actions.

The various sanctions may have their role, and even the Ukrainians fighting to defend their homes and way of life can be understood, but in our role as peaceworkers we need to focus on finding alternatives and opportunities to demonstrate and engage peace.

Our work is to try to introduce peaceful means of engagement. But when an actor chooses violent means, how do we respond? We can look at what happens after the conflict, and how we can support people in other ways. We can look for conversation points between Ukrainians and Russians, also to differentiate between the Russian government/military and Russian civilians.

There is a large amount of money now redistributed to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. But that can't be the only option. We need to develop activities and they need to be funded. We need to kickstart activities that go beyond Humanitarian Aid. We need to work in all the countries in the area (including Russia and Belarus) to keep the conflict from spreading and strengthen whatever is left of the civil society in Russia.

The conflict is probably not going to stop any time soon, and it might spread (e.g. the Balkans). What can we do there? Different conceptual approaches are needed. In a discussion it was said, that rallies in Germany are a nice thing, but they have primarily a symbolic value. They will not reach the leadership in Russia. In that regard, it was shared, that maybe the demonstrations in Germany won't change minds in the Russian leadership, but the people in Ukraine can also feel encouraged knowing that the world has not given up on them, even if at times it might feel mostly symbolic. Among the alumni present sanctions have been seen as a viable option right now.

The status quo during the exchange was, Ukraine receives mainly aid and planning ahead is a challenge. Tasks on the ground are, to foster unity, to help IDPs & local communities, to build empathy. The question remains, when to re-build relationships with the Russian civil society, also, with the state itself. Opinions were divided on this, many felt that it was too early for this for the time being.

There are a lot of initiatives for mental health support, work with trauma for adults and children. Therefore, important tasks are: coordinating different programs, establishing priorities (such as vulnerable groups), recruiting support groups, mitigating trauma work with youth and women groups etc. Furthermore, strengthening cyber resilience & cyber security, peace education and skill building.

Here are some more notes on what can be done in the Ukraine, but also be adapted to other places of violent conflicts:

- Discuss possible coordination with other humanitarian and development agencies to focus on the needs of war-affected populations, institutional capacities, and comparative advantages and agree on the need to explore program harmonization, possibility for joint programming units and coordination to avoid overlapping of activities in the specific areas of actions and possibility of joint activity with some of them. Consequently and conditioned to the above, establish a framework for the post-conflict activities of the international community.
- Approaching NGOs and Partners and discussing their priorities as they are key actors in post-conflict situations.
- Establishing reintegration program priorities such as most vulnerable groups, children, youth, single mothers, elderly people, homeless people, unemployed people
- Raising the visibility of program activities and spreading information within affected citizen groups, regions, villages through media, leaflets, NGOs, Partners, coordinators and using all previous contacts and youth engagement in order to raise awareness of the support available and initiate awareness of support needed among other subjects (engaging and support financially teams of volunteers, youth preparing outlets, portals, dissemination of

the war facts and the truth from the field as we might be lacking testimonials/empathy reports)

- Recruiting volunteers and approaching solidarity groups, local and international reeducation and training of people to work in child care and providing help to elderly and sick.
- Supporting child centers, mitigating trauma, building and reconstructing schools, children's playgrounds, organizing children workshops, drawing competitions, etc. in order to enable returning to an "everyday life" where possible.
- Creating a public youth group and addressing youth problems, physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization throughout their involvement and needs to be articulated, initiating creative thinking and local mobilization on a subproject that will be selected within this group.
- Mobile medical service to improve access to healthcare service for the most vulnerable members in most affected detached regions – in-home medical care, searching for volunteers and supporting in medical equipment, first aid equipment, and basic medications and apparatus
- Supporting the reconstruction of important national images and historical monuments destroyed during the war
- Supporting local media and local influencers in sharing positive stories, positive change, progress, ideas, sharing stories through local medias (partners) and local influencers

There were two links shared by our alumni: Inmedio Berlin produced a short document on "How to talk to people in bunkers", a very basic guide in Ukrainian, Russian and English on psychosocial basics of how to be supportive to people in danger: <https://www.inmedio.de/de/how-to-talk-to-people-in-bunkers/> And a video about civil resistance in Ukraine & the region: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcttVAA- -0>

From the very start of the X-Change, it was clear that these discussions might not answer all questions, but actually raise more. Nevertheless, many alumni felt empowered, thankful for the exchange and the met need to engage and listen to each other, to the fears and hopes of others in the room. "We are not hopeless, that no strategies for peacemaking or -building are available, but reality shows that options are limited." On the one side there were alumni frustrated that some people support violent defense, and on the other hand there were alumni that were asking for the peace work to rethink the attitude towards self-defense in a violent, or military manner.

There was the question for more meetings like this, as for some people, this has a coordinating and idea sharing component. More comments of alumni were: "There are currently no "right" or "wrong" answers on how to end this conflict - most important is that different opinions are heard and evaluated from different perspectives. That might be a first step towards finding solutions." Also: "It is important to reflect on one's role to adapt to a changing environment." It was shared "that despite all the government crackdowns we should not give up on Russian and Belarusian civil society and strengthen them as best we can". "Peaceworkers, our role doesn't stop when war starts. We may then shift from Peacebuilders to Peacemakers, but we need to seek out alternatives." "Thanks for your contribution. This meeting showed existing needs and challenges. I got new issues to think about." "Peaceful action in here and now, peacebuilding afterwards and prevention are to be thought at the same time with the same priority. Coordination and connection of those is a main topic right now." "Thanks for all of you. Great to see so many people with similar concerns & questions."

We thank everybody for the exchange, it is wonderful to have all your expertise from different places and to exchange on your thoughts and experiences. We invite our alumni to our X-Changes on different topics around once a month. If you have a question for the alumni community, a project you would like to present, or any sort of doubt (at your work) that you would like to discuss, you can always contact us via: academy@forumZFD.de, we are grateful to hear from you!

X-Change by Alumni for Alumni: Academy for Conflict Transformation – 25.03.2022 – Non-violence in violent times?