

Inter- and intra-ethnic dialogues on war-time violence and its legacies

JUSTINT Policy Paper

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Summary

Discussions about war-time violence and its legacies are necessary to pave the way for reconciliation and reckoning with the history of human rights violations in societies divided by conflict. However, donors have recently lost interest in funding inter-group and intra-group dialogues, specifically, in the context of dwindling funds for transitional justice activities more generally in the Western Balkans. Transitional justice is a field of scholarship and practice preoccupied with a response by states and societies to the legacy of violence and human rights violations. We engaged with representatives of civil society organisations from the region working in the field of transitional justice to share our research on dialogues about war-time violence and its legacies between members of opposed ethnic groups and within groups.

The exchange of views resulted in the formulation of four recommendations for policy and practice: 1) there is a need for continued funding of transitional justice projects, in general, and, 2) a particular need for training in political communication, while 3) shifting the focus of evaluation to the quality of dialogues and their benefits, and 4) further supporting knowledge exchange between scholars and practitioners to share policy-relevant insights.

Introduction

One of the key aims of transitional justice is to foster dialogues about difficult topics related to past violence and support peacebuilding. However, there is mixed evidence about the utility of dialogues in societies divided by conflict. Some have argued that inter-group dialogues between members of opposed groups previously involved in conflict and those occurring within a group can promote peacebuilding. Inter-group dialogues can promote inter-group reconciliation, while intra-group dialogues can promote a critical discussion of a group's involvement in conflict. Recently, these dialogues have come under criticism for entrenching ethnic identities, dividing communities, distorting the truth about suffering and re-traumatising victims, instead of promoting either reconciliation or critical engagement with the past. These arguments can lead to either discouraging or abandoning projects that foster dialogues about these difficult topics. This trend can destabilise fragile post-conflict contexts by leaving conflicting narratives about the conflict and the opponents unchallenged, thus deepening polarisation between and within groups.

As part of the European Research Council (ERC)-funded research programme [“Justice Interactions and Peace-building: From Static to Dynamic Discourses across National, Ethnic, Gender and Age Groups \(JUSTINT, Project no. 772354\)”](#), the London School of Economics and Political Science held a collaborative workshop in Zagreb, Croatia, on 6 June 2023 to address the subject of dialogues about the legacy of violence in societies divided by conflict. The workshop gathered representatives of civil society groups that work on transitional justice issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo and Serbia. The workshop provided an opportunity for members of the JUSTINT research team and practitioners to reflect on the lessons from practice and formulate policy recommendations, while engaging with the JUSTINT’s emerging findings about interactions within and across groups in face-to-face and virtual discussions about the legacy of war crimes.

Background

The conflicts that followed the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, also broadly referred to as the Western Balkans, began in 1991 and continued, with intermittent breaks, until 2001. The conflicts were fought across ethnic lines and involved numerous human rights violations and mass atrocities. The most visible mechanism of transitional justice in the region was an *ad hoc* court established by the United Nations that prosecuted war crimes from 1993 to 2017, known as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Domestic war crimes trials and civil society initiatives (both local and regional) aimed at addressing the legacy of violence were also enacted. Despite these efforts, the discourses of denial and self-victimhood have been prevalent among all ethnic groups, presenting an impediment to reconciliation. The legacy of the war remains contested within and across groups, and continues to impact politics and inter-group relations across the region. At the same time, the states remain segregated along ethnic lines, to varying degrees, which stands in the way of inter-group communication.

JUSTINT Research

To better understand the effects of dialogues on peacebuilding, the JUSTINT project examined inter-ethnic interactions in Serbia, Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and intra-ethnic interactions in Serbia and on social media. These interactions focused on discussions about human rights violations committed during the Balkan wars of the 1990s, specifically the wars on the territory of in the former Yugoslavia. The findings indicate that more attention needs to be paid to the kind of communication that constitutes a dialogue. Specifically, our research identifies several dimensions that constitute dialogue conducive to inter-group reconciliation and confronting in-group responsibility for human rights violations.

Trust and orientation to the other were fundamental to peace-promoting outcomes and were facilitated by authenticity and intent of the interlocutor, understanding of the other as a collaborator and not an adversary, seeking opinions of others in the conversation, validating their perspectives and/or experiences, and politeness. These characteristics of a dialogue

can help people engage with opposed views constructively. It can also lead to changing of views in the direction of accepting others' viewpoints. This applies to both inter- and intra-ethnic interactions. The research shows that inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic interactions are more complex than they are often theorised and that speaking behaviour assumed to be counter-productive to the process, such as expressions of ethnic interest, may in fact aid reckoning with the difficult past.

Furthermore, we have identified differences in how people communicate on social media and in person. Much of the interaction about the legacy of war on social media was conflictual, abundant in personal attacks and bullying. Meanwhile, face-to-face interactions were confrontational, but not conflictual. In face-to-face encounters individuals were expressing disagreements respectfully while considering the views of their interlocutors and their counterarguments.

Lastly, we identified the importance of an extended exchange. People do not necessarily change their views about the difficult past immediately when confronted with new information. Views about the difficult past can change in engaged interactions that are lengthy exchanges through which the perspectives on the difficult past are negotiated and revised. In these interactions people may not always change their views. However, they listen to others, disagree constructively, 'attack' an argument and not a person, and are more open to considering other people's perspectives. This creates a civic space conducive to free-floating discussion where people treat those they disagree with as collaborators rather than adversaries.

Zagreb Workshop

Members of local and international civil society organisations (CSOs) who attended the workshop conduct a range of activities within communities and across ethnic lines in fragile post-conflict contexts. Some of these CSOs work directly with transitional justice issues, ranging from being directly engaged in activities related to dealing with the violent past to running of youth centres that provide space for inter-group interactions. The workshop had three goals: 1) to discuss the challenges the participants faced in their work in their local environments; 2) to brainstorm how the research findings on inter- and intra-ethnic dialogues can inform practice, and 3) to provide an opportunity to learn from each other through an exchange of ideas and experiences. Based on these exchanges, we formulated recommendations to address challenges in the domain of transitional justice and civil society, specifically related to inter-group and intra-group dialogues. These recommendations apply both to state and non-state funders and civil society recipients of those funds.

Key Recommendations

Continue funding transitional justice activities

Continued funding of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic dialogues is needed to provide spaces where people can engage in discussions about the difficult past within and across different ethnic groups. Despite the importance of reconciliation as a policy goal and foundation of peace and security in the region of the Western Balkans, external funding for reconciliation activities has dwindled. This has restricted the scope and extent of civil society led activities in this field, despite compelling evidence of the existing demand and willingness in local communities, including the youth, to engage with the difficult past.

Organise training in political communication

Focus projects on training in political communication, because how people communicate about the difficult past matters and can foster mutual understanding both in face-to-face and virtual interactions, e.g. on social media. It is essential to offer training about conversational strategies that allow confrontational exchanges where people can express different opinions, without descending into conflict. These can include disagreeing respectfully and encouraging openness to the perspectives of others through active listening, engaging with counterarguments and asking questions. In the long run, even attitudes and views that change in the direction of openness to others' perspectives are prone to reversing back to more exclusive positions amid renewed tensions and political turmoil. In contrast, skills in political communication have other long-term benefits. They can support the culture of democracy and can help tackle new tensions.

Nurture process over outcome

Funding of transitional justice projects and evaluation of dialogues requires a shift in focus onto process over outcome. Successful outcomes of transitional justice processes may take a long time to yield observable positive outcomes, if at all. Nonetheless, there is value in the process, which itself may be transformative. It can promote reconciliation through exposure to new information, inter-group contact and attitude change both towards the contested past and towards former antagonists.

Support knowledge exchange

These recommendations are the outcome of an exchange of evidence and ideas between academic researchers and civil society practitioners. Without a meaningful discussion with practitioners, the implications of research findings cannot be fully appreciated. Opportunities for knowledge exchange including scholars and practitioners should be supported as well as collaboration and networking between civil society groups.

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