

Recommendations for further steps to start dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan

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Methodology

In November and December 2022, mirroring dialogue meetings were held in Armenia (Yerevan) and Azerbaijan (Gazakh region), which succeeded to collect a cross-section of the opinions of the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies regarding recommendations for starting a dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The meetings were attended by 37 men and women in the age range between 17 and 66: refugees and local people affected by the conflict, as well as people who were not directly affected by the conflict. The geography of participants covered both the central cities and towns of the countries, as well as the border zones.

The work took place over several meetings, the working subgroups were divided into 5-6 people. At these meetings, the participants exchanged views on their vision of peace and what needs to be done to achieve it.

The discussion was based on the questions that were prepared and confirmed in advance by both sides. They were aimed at studying the position of the participants and their proposals for peace and dialogue. During the meetings, the participants also spoke about the current problems that hinder the peace process. In this document, we have tried to group and convey the main proposals.

Recommendations from participants

I. Societies should try to abandon stereotypes, learn each other's values and cultures, recognize similarities and be tolerant to differences

Over the years of confrontation, the image of an enemy with whom it is impossible to imagine good neighborly relations has strengthened in societies. The less people are familiar with the values and culture of the other side, the easier it is for the authorities to manipulate feelings and moods, and distort facts, thereby radicalizing and demonizing societies, imposing stereotypes. By getting to know and studying the values and culture of the other side, we can find a lot in common and notice that what makes us different is not intolerable. It becomes clear that this can be accepted. And what our cultures do not accept, we can discuss, and understand the roots of phenomena and think about how it will be possible to coexist with it or change it in the future.

It is necessary to act towards the identification and elimination of stereotypes among people. This will help to understand that there is no genetic, constant enmity between our people, that the problems are not mystical, but real. Perhaps after this, people will better understand each other's problems.

Field work is also needed to identify stereotypes. With the help of social research, such stereotypes should be identified, grouped, and proven to be unfounded. It is necessary to create

platforms where it will be possible to get acquainted with the values and culture of each other. Further to carry out joint or at least parallel projects for this purpose.

II. Strive not to violate the rights of any of the parties, guided by international norms and rights

For decades, we have faced the fact that in our confrontation, international norms and human rights are constantly violated. Very often, the agreements certified by the signatures of the leaders of the countries are not respected. The person feels completely insecure. As a result, distrust of the opposing side is growing from year to year. If the understanding of international norms and law by both sides is strengthened, then it will be possible, at least, to stop the armed confrontation. The hope will come, and with it also new, alternative ideas/methods for a peaceful solution of the conflict. There will be a realization that non-compliance with rights and norms can lead to the fact that larger/ stronger countries absorb smaller/weaker ones. Trust on the other side will increase, and with it, there will be a stronger sense of personal security for everyone.

We know that both countries have not accepted the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice. Public awareness of this mechanism will not contribute to the resolution of the conflict, but will clearly show which of the deeds the world recognizes as a war crime. This will strengthen the awareness of the parties not only of the degree of inadmissibility of war and violent methods of conflict resolution but will also help to abandon their maximalist claims. Societies need to be made aware of existing international norms and rights, as well as the consequences of not respecting them. We need educational projects and discussions with experts in the field of international law, publication of thematic materials, and educational training.

III. Inform people about various peaceful (non-military) ways to resolve conflicts

It has become ingrained in our societies that conflict can only be resolved by force. People are not aware of other non-violent ways to resolve territorial disputes other than war. This leads to the militarization of society from below, to the conclusion that the military way is the only way to resolve territorial conflicts.

Realizing the alternative power of accepting international norms and respecting human rights can become a priority for societies in our countries. There will be a need to send a message from “the bottom to the top” about a non-violent solution to our confrontation: the demand for the renunciation of bloodshed. Given the desire of society for peace, people who believe that conflicts can be resolved by non-violent means will be against war.

Educational projects are needed to familiarize societies with the existing non-violent methods of resolving territorial disputes and the history of conflicts already resolved in this way with the involvement of international experts. Films can be made about this, relevant materials published, trainings and conferences held.

IV. Prepare societies for compromises

The more blood is shed, the longer the path to trust, and hence to peace. Even if it is possible to agree on borders and a peace agreement, the question of its legitimization in the eyes of the population of both countries will arise, for which neither side is ready at this moment in history.

For a working agreement, societies need to be prepared for such unpopular compromises. Societies will begin discourse to seek solutions that do not compromise the security of either side or to seek guarantees of security through compromises.

Numerous discussions are needed in small groups with invited experts (political scientists, international lawyers, diplomats) about possible ways to resolve the conflict and their likely consequences.

V. Be an active and honest citizen of your country: try to express and defend your position

The majority of people in our societies believe that nothing depends on them personally in resolving the conflict, and that they cannot influence the decisions of their governments in any way. The victims of this conflict in many cases are ordinary members of society.

The active position of a person influences the formation of the country's civil society and the formation of public opinion. Without taking into account the opinion of active citizens, the leadership runs the risk of not being re-elected. Actively defending one's position can lead to influence on decision-making by the country's leadership. Citizens should know their rights and should not sacrifice their rights for the sake of the interests of the authorities. The government must take into account the real wishes of citizens.

It is necessary to develop civil society through non-formal education. Introduce democratic values and knowledge about human rights through educational projects, informing about human rights, the constitution, the role of individuals in public administration and explaining its benefits.

VI. Build "bridges of trust" through dialogue between equals / on equal terms

It is impossible to build a constructive dialogue if one of the parties of the conflict always acts from a position of strength, "forcing" peace on its own terms. Any pressure, and violence will sooner or later cause opposition, which means it is fraught with new military clashes. Political manipulation poses a constant threat to the peace process. Because of the war, there is almost no communication between our societies. This lack of communication further alienated societies from each other.

Through the building of "bridges of trust" and constructive dialogue, a gradual process of erasing the image of the enemy, fostering mutual tolerance, understanding and respect for the cultural environment of ethnic groups living in a given territory can begin.

Trying to forge links will be the first step in setting the stage for the implementation of possible future peace agreements. Live communication will help lower the degree of hatred and aggression.

It is important to create platforms for live communication, and thematic live meetings on neutral territory, as well as searching for opportunities for joint projects.

It is necessary to establish a dialogue on issues of security (of states and individuals), human rights, democratization, and the formation of civil society, in the humanitarian sphere and in the sphere of international law. It would be valuable to create a common platform for the exchange of ideas and organize dialogue meetings between various professionals, as well as between groups of people affected by the conflict, discussions, panels and conferences for communication.

VII. Establishing cultural ties

After both countries became independent, only limited contact has been developed due to the conflict. Building cultural bonds can overcome such alienation. In this way, channels of dialogue can be opened, and it would become easier for people to recognize each other.

This can be done by making joint short films and documentaries, writing fiction stories, creating joint music and dance videos, etc.

VIII. Increase media literacy of the population to identify propaganda

Propaganda is an obstacle to revealing the real situation within societies. A significant part of the news in the media is propaganda and fake news. Often people read and believe the media without checking the news sources, they cannot realize the difference between real news and fake news.

The impact of propaganda can be reduced by increasing media literacy. To do this, it is desired to conduct training on media literacy and spread materials about this topic.

IX. Hate speech on the Internet should be confronted

The ecosphere of hatred on the Internet does not reflect the real situation in countries and attitudes towards the other side. Mutual hatred is especially implanted in the Internet space. Social networks are like virtual battlefields. Nationalist and chauvinistic speeches are present both in informational materials and in comments to them. This hate speech breeds new generations in the same hostile spirit and delays the possibility of peace. In many cases, people do not realize that they are being influenced by the hate speech of the material they are reading.

Meta Recommendations

- i. It is recommended to continue the initiated work on collecting these recommendations and to acquaint the participants of the discussions with the results of the other side, discussing the differences and similarities in the received recommendations.
- ii. It is worth developing in mini-dialogue groups (up to 10 people) the next steps based on the developed general recommendations.
- iii. There is a need for training (in mini-dialogue groups within each country separately) to improve communication skills: to express opinion, to listen / perceive what is said, negotiate and work in groups, not focusing only on own recommendation.

Afterword

Armenian side: *We consider bloodshed and military conflict resolution to be unacceptable in the 21st century. It is necessary to make every effort to inform societies about existing international norms and rights, about the possibilities of resolving territorial disputes by civilized, non-violent methods. As opposed to the demonization and radicalization of societies in our countries, we must try to build "bridges of trust" through constructive dialogue. But for these steps to become possible, it is necessary to stop aggressive actions and respect the elementary rights of people.*

Azerbaijani side: *Settling the current conflict between the two nations is an important task. To do this, our societies must learn to understand each other and make coexistence possible. Real development, prosperity and independent state building in the South Caucasus cannot be completed without achieving fair peace in accordance with international legal norms and principles. Our people must get rid of this chain stretched on their feet and move towards the future in a peaceful and good neighborhood.*

It is worth noting that these recommendations were collected without the participation of the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan and reflect the real proposals of the group members in the events held on both sides