
The Power of Culture in Reconciliation in the Ukraine Crisis

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MORE EUROPE – external cultural relations initiative commissioned a study on the power of culture as a tool for reconciliation in the context of the Ukraine crisis. In the course of June 2014, twenty-five in-depth expert interviews and many more e-mail exchanges with cultural operators and culture activists with the relevant experience from Ukraine, Russia and third countries (including from the UK, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands) were held. This policy paper contains the results of the study and offers an analysis of their thoughts and suggestions on the subject, the current situation and the way forward. Importantly, and perhaps surprisingly, the responses of cultural operators from different countries (Ukraine, Russia and EU Member States) and cultural fields presented a rather coherent view on the power of culture in reconciliation following the conflict inside Ukraine and between Ukraine and Russia.

Culture as a reconciliation tool is an extremely relevant and important topic

Virtually every contacted expert underlined the high relevance and importance of the subject and expressed a sense of urgency in dealing with it. The socio-political and socio-economic role of culture has been a neglected issue in Ukraine and, moreover, has been rarely approached from an angle of reconciliation within the Ukrainian society and between Ukraine and its neighbours, Russia in particular. A rapid comprehension of the real potential and even centrality of culture as a reconciliation tool, “*an eye-opening stage*” of sorts, is said to be taking place currently. Whether more or less sceptical about the ability of culture to end the conflict at this point, respondents unanimously agreed that engaging with and through culture would be absolutely necessary in the (immediate) future. Culture is believed to play a crucial role due to its direct and especially long-term effects as a uniting force; as a tool to address and discuss dividing issues; as a tool “to restore” and “to heal”, “to cement the political decisions”, if and when taken, and – importantly – “to prevent” a similar confrontation in the future. Two experts used a metaphor of cultural efforts providing “a virus” and “a bacillus”, which will then spread and settle in society. The present is considered to be not the most favourable time for cultural initiatives stimulating reconciliation (given the ongoing militarised conflict in the East of Ukraine) and, at the same time, the best time for such engagement

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² www.moreeurope.org – *MORE EUROPE* is a cultural civic initiative. It is a new approach towards external relations, based on the promotion of fundamental values, two-way dialogue, and the recognition of the role of civil society. More Europe aims to convince politicians and policy makers to place cultural relations in the heart of the EU’s external affairs. It has both a research and project development strand.

(given “the inflamed public consciousness” and the huge social demand for rethinking and reconciling the recent events).

Reconciliation is the right end-goal, but not the right word to communicate it

Reconciliation appears to be an implicit dimension of any cultural activity that is aimed at uniting societies, also when the audience and even cultural operators themselves are unaware of the socio-political relevance of their work. However, the word “*reconciliation*” itself is considered to be unsuitable for framing cultural efforts to this end, because of its semantic emphasis on conflict and division. Instead of speaking of reconciling the divided and estranged parts of society, respondents advised referring to “*dialogue*” and a process of building or restoring trust, mutual respect and understanding within society as a whole. After decades of black-and-white politics under the Soviet rule, the culture of dialogue is said to be in deficit in both Ukraine and Russia. Yet, it is a continuous dialogue among cultural operators, between cultural operators and their audiences, among local communities, between communities and state authorities, between Ukrainian and Russian actors and societies that is needed. Ultimately, this reconciliation process, this dialogue should lead to a development of a new social contract inside Ukraine and in the relationship between Ukraine and Russia, to replace the one inherited from the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire periods.

Reconciliation inside Ukraine as the first step in reconciliation between Ukraine and Russia

Respondents were unanimous in stating that *inside-Ukraine reconciliation* should be the first step in *Ukraine-Russia reconciliation*. First, reconciliation (dialogue) inside Ukraine is considered to be necessary and possible even in the currently heated socio-political atmosphere and in the circumstances of an on-going conflict in the East of the country. This task could be taken up already today, and it is clear where the European partners can contribute. Secondly, a reassessment of (multiple) Ukrainian identities and a consensus in Ukrainian society is said to be a precondition for the future Ukraine-Russia dialogue. The opinions of respondents on the visibility of the latter under the current circumstances were divided: while some argued that one needs to wait for political atmosphere to become more favourable and for the emotional charge in the society to decrease, others argued that a dialogue for reconciliation could and should be started immediately (at however low scale possible). Many respondents emphasised that the conflict inside Ukraine and between Ukraine and Russia is not a conflict of national or ethnic cultures, but a conflict of politics (spheres of political and business influence) and civilisations (post-colonial in Ukraine and post-imperialistic in Russia). Therefore, a decision at the highest political level is required for any large-scale cooperation, also in the field of culture. In any case, the value-component, the socio-political dimension of cultural initiatives should be downplayed rather than emphasised in dealings with Russian partners, in light of the tendency to restrict foreign engagement in Russia.

Local – communities, experiences, experts, offices – at the centre

Respondents were also unanimous in highlighting the central position of “the local” for any reconciliatory cultural projects to have effect. *Local communities* were mentioned as the main level

of engagement, the main target and the main driver of prospective cultural projects. It is advised that the projects are bottom-up-driven, peer-to-peer, reach out to lay people, not only cultural operators, and engage peripheries, not only large cities. Many respondents emphasised that, contrary to a wide-spread belief, there is no divide across or homogeneity within regions in Ukraine; therefore, thinking and working in terms of the East-West divide would be counter-productive. Instead, one should work with a country as a whole and every community as a particular. There is said to be a lot of potential to capitalise on and cultivate plurality in Ukraine when developing national and local identities, similar to how this is done in Europe. *Local experiences* were mentioned as the preferred point of reference when designing the content of projects. Best practices from other conflicts and countries are welcome as a source of ideas on the types and formats of engagement (e.g. Poland's relations with Russia, Lithuania and Germany were named). However, the Ukraine crisis offers a distinct context, and these best practices should not be applied mechanically (e.g. a special warning was made against the mechanic application of best practices from the Balkan states). More concretely, the experience of reconciliation between various ethnic communities in the city of Lviv was mentioned as a "Ukrainian best practice". *Local experts* were mentioned as the core intellectual driver for respective activities. At the same time, external (European) experts with relevant professional and personal intercultural experience are welcome as advisers, coaches and participants (but not as mentors). Finally, *local offices* of external (European) cultural operators were named as the most valuable source of information, for "they know the field best".

A preference for civil society over state and municipal authorities

With respect to local partners and project design, respondents expressed a general preference for informal, small-scale, bottom-up, civil society level over the official, nation-wide, top-down, governmental level. However, they admit that it is important to engage with *state authorities* when developing a national strategy for the culture sector overall and the reconciliation dialogue in particular (which is currently missing) and to ensure the support of *local authorities* when implementing a project in a community (which is always an advantage). Moreover, individual, *inter-personal contacts* among cultural operators inside Ukraine and between Ukraine and Russia are reported to be a very effective and sometimes the only available channel of communication in the absence of inter-institutional cooperation. Thus, there is a need to build on these inter-personal contacts more effectively and transform them from one-on-one interactions into sustainable networks.

A combination of traditional and innovative ideas

At the most general level, respondents emphasised the futility of "quick-fix solutions" and stressed the need for meaningful, long-term engagement. In terms of the best way forward, the potential of both *traditional* genres, solutions, projects (e.g. scholarly exchanges, literature, documentaries, film and music festivals, museum expositions, master-classes) and *innovative*, interdisciplinary ones (e.g. experimental theatre, opera and cinema, literary slams, fashion industry, computer games, postcards, social media) were acknowledged. The interdisciplinary solutions were often singled out as more effective due to their ability to frame the complexity of the situation and attract larger

audiences. Importantly, no one “perfect” cultural sector or project format was said to exist, and engagement across the field was mentioned as necessary for reaching out to various audiences.

A combination of bilateral, regional and multilateral cooperation

With regard to inside-Ukraine reconciliation, respondents highlighted the need to engage partners from various communities across the country (free from the East-West bias), greeted the possibility of engaging external partners (from Europe) and mentioned as particularly valuable the engagement of partners from other post-communist and post-Soviet states with similar experiences. With regard to Ukraine-Russia reconciliation, most respondents advised to keep the dialogue bilateral, arguing that every additional partner(-state) would bring new issues to the agenda and so divert the focus and perhaps undermine the entire exercise. Others, however, believe that bilateral Ukraine-Russia dialogue may prove to be too confronting and “head-on”, especially in the current political context, and so advocated for regional and multilateral cooperation. Also here a preference for partners from other post-communist states was expressed, with Poland and Lithuania named most often. Some respondents explicitly warned against the inclusion of partners from other post-Soviet states, as these all have their own difficult relationship with Russia. The decision on whether a project should be implemented through bilateral, regional or multilateral cooperation needs to be situational.

Youth as the main “target audience”

Youth as the main target social group for reconciliatory cultural activities came out strongly in the interviews. Most generally, youth is the future of a nation. More specifically, it is the most active and often the most receptive category of society – and so more easily engaged in and more likely convinced through cultural initiatives. At the same time, in the case of the Ukraine crisis, youth is also the most traumatised category: young people in Ukraine and Russia have fewer linkages to “the common past” to hold them together, and it was the young who watched their peers die or get injured during the Euromaidan and the conflict in the East. With respect to reconciliation and dialogue among the youth, a strong linkage between culture and education is in need of exploration. The great potential of an intra-Ukrainian, Ukraine-Russia and intra-regional student exchange (similar to Erasmus) was stressed.

Economic factor retains relevance

The economic factor retains relevance and was mentioned in practically every conversation. First, the economic factor featured in terms of the overall poverty of the population, which makes it a reluctant participant in cultural events. As stated above, reaching out to lay people is an essential element in reconciliation through culture, and it is a (challenging) task of project designers to find a way to engage the wider masses. Second, the economic factor was mentioned in terms of socio-economic relevance of cultural development: strong linkages to stimulating civil society development, tourism, mobility, city development, entrepreneurship, innovation and the IT sector were repeatedly brought up. Finally, the economic factor as the lack of funding to realise the relevant projects at a necessary scale is said to be a serious constraint.

European partners have multiple roles to play

Notwithstanding the emphasis placed on the necessarily local drive behind cultural initiatives aimed at reconciliation and the attachment of these initiatives to local communities and experiences, the respondents acknowledged the important role to be played in this process by European partners. First of all, European partners were mentioned as a vital source of external stimulus for state authorities and civil society alike. This stimulus concerns the stage of taking up the task and the stage of implementing it. European partners are also an important source of expertise and ideas, including on best practices as potential formats of engagement. However, as stated above, one would be advised to be very sensitive in the application of best practices from other contexts, as every conflict is distinct. Similarly, European experts are best chosen on the basis of their personal intercultural experiences rather than nationality. Respondents stressed that European partners are welcome as coaches and observers or as participants on an equal footing: a mentor-approach would be inappropriate in what is a highly sensitive and deeply personal process. Stimulating regional cooperation and setting an institutional framework for it (as with the Eastern Partnership) was said to be an important contribution of Europe to domestic processes in what are rather un-institutionalised civil societies. Finally, European partners are important sources of technical and financial assistance, through grants, capacity-building and other support. The need for European actors to cooperate more among themselves and with the local partners was mentioned separately.

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MORE EUROPE is a cultural civic initiative. The initiators are:

