GCSP
Geneva Centre for Security Policy

How to promote dialogue in a polarised political climate

ETH Zurich

Keynote by
Thomas Greminger, Director, GCSP

Zurich, 1 September 2021

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to speak with you today about a major challenge of our times, namely how to promote dialogue in a polarised political climate.

Talk to you enemies

I am sure that you are all familiar with this problem, either from your own country's experience or from observing international relations. It seems that, even more so than in the past, people currently see things in black and white. "I am right, you are wrong." There is little appetite for compromise and no culture of cooperation.

Sometimes it is even considered treasonous to talk to the other side.

And yet, without dialogue, how can we understand each other? How can we overcome our differences and seek common ground? As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: "If you want peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies".

Let me give you a concrete example of promoting dialogue in a highly polarised environment from when Switzerland was chairing the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2014. This is not a situation that I have discussed publicly before, so I look forward to sharing my first-hand experiences with you.

Promoting dialogue on the crisis in and around Ukraine

As you may recall, relations between the Russian Federation and the West were tense in the winter of 2013.

In November 2013 there were protests in Ukraine, particularly the capital Kyiv, after President Viktor Yanukovych rejected a deal for closer economic integration with the European Union (EU). The protests steadily became bigger and more violent. By February 2014 Independence Square (Maidan) in central Kyiv had become a battleground, and on 20 February 88 people were killed in clashes with the police.

The Ukrainian authorities were not responsive to offers of international mediation, including from the OSCE. This changed as if a switch had been thrown when President Yanukovych was voted out of office and left the country during the night of 21 February.

By a fortunate coincidence, just three days later (on 24 February) the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office (CiO), Swiss Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter, was scheduled to address the United Nations Security Council. He proposed the establishment of an International Contact Group on Ukraine as part of a broader package of de-escalation measures. Such a group (which initially comprised the EU, the United States, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine and later then became the so called N4 comprising Ukraine, the Russian Federation, France and Germany) was important because Ukraine and the Russian Federation were at loggerheads and not likely to resolve the issue bilaterally, the UN was focused on other issues (like the war in Syria, the crisis in the Middle East, and the Ebola epidemic), Ukraine was not a member of NATO, and the Russians did not consider the EU to be an honest broker.

Almost every day the situation grew worse. There was a real danger that the crisis could spiral out of control, especially when unidentified gunmen ("little

green men") seized government buildings in Simferopol, the capital of Crimea, at the end of February, and on 1 March the Russian parliament approved President Putin's request to use force in Ukraine to protect Russian interests.

On 3 March Ukraine requested the OSCE to deploy a mission to Ukraine. The odds of this happening were pretty long. The OSCE is a consensus-based organisation, so getting all the parties – particularly the Russian Federation and Ukraine – to agree was going to be difficult. Unlike the UN, the OSCE has limited experience of and capacity for deploying peace operations. And it was not clear if the Russian Federation was willing to internationalise the conflict. Furthermore, a referendum held on 16 March under duress, i.e. irregular conditions, resulted in an overwhelming percentage of the population of Crimea voting for independence and for joining the Russian Federation.

However, the OSCE had several advantages. It has an inclusive membership – including Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the United States, and all EU countries. It takes a cooperative (and non-threatening) approach. It has a creative range of tools for conflict prevention and crisis management that have been tried and tested in several countries of the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union. And it is considered a regional arrangement under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter.

Furthermore, Switzerland as CiO was well positioned to promote dialogue. As a neutral country with significant resources, a strong mediation capacity and a tradition as an honest broker, it was well equipped to try to mobilise consensus. Furthermore, because of Switzerland's unique leadership system (which elects a president for one year from among seven ministers of the Federal government), Foreign Minister Burkhalter was also president of the Swiss Confederation at the time. This enabled him to speak as an equal with other presidents like Germany's Angela Merkel and the Russian Federation's Vladimir Putin.

For the first three weeks of March 2014 diplomats in Vienna tried to hammer out a mandate for a possible OSCE monitoring mission. As the Swiss ambassador to the OSCE in Vienna at the time, I chaired the Permanent Council at a gathering of the ambassadors of all 57 Participating States, so the responsibility fell on my shoulders to build consensus on a decision that would enable international monitors to be sent to Ukraine to hopefully de-escalate the situation.

One of the biggest challenges was to get the Russian Federation on board. A breakthrough came when Federal President Burkhalter stressed to President Putin the potential benefit of an international presence to protect the interests of Russian-speakers in eastern Ukraine.

Nevertheless, negotiations were difficult, and it often looked like the process would break down. There were a number of times when I thought we would fail. But the dangers that would result from failure were too great. Furthermore, I had energetic and optimistic colleagues who would say "Come on Thomas, give it another try". At the end of the day, all the necessary political will was there, and all the major players did not want to risk an unpredictable escalation of the situation in Ukraine.

When negotiations got stuck at the ambassadorial level in Vienna, we would elevate the level to engage foreign ministers and key players in Berlin, Kyiv and Moscow. There were even a few phone calls with presidents.

Remarkably, by 21 March – less than three weeks after we had received a formal request from Ukraine – a deal had been struck to deploy an OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine.

I must admit that one of the greatest challenges was the geographical scope of the mission. Ukraine and other countries, like the United States and Canada, wanted to include an explicit reference to Crimea. For the Russian Federation this was a deal breaker. The scope of the SMM was therefore left ambiguous: the relevant decision referred to a number of places in Ukraine where monitors would be initially deployed.

As a result of these intense diplomatic negotiations, the way was open to deploy 100 international civilian monitors. The first observers arrived in Ukraine within 24 hours of the political decision being taken – which must be a record for an international organisation.

Today, more than seven years later, there are more than 800 monitors in the SMM from over 40 countries. They are assisted by technology, particularly short-, medium- and long-range unmanned aerial vehicles, and by camera and satellite imagery. Although this is a civilian mission operating in a war zone, fortunately only one mission member has been killed thus far.

The SMM has been the eyes and ears of the international community. It has facilitated confidence-building measures and hundreds of local ceasefires or "windows of silence" that have enabled the repair of critical infrastructure, including water, gas and electricity supply infrastructure. So I think I can clearly argue that the SMM has successfully contributed to preventing a further escalation of the conflict.

Lessons learned about promoting dialogue

Based on this experience and other mediation and negotiation processes that I have been involved in – e.g. peace processes in Nepal, Sudan, Uganda and Colombia – I would like to share with you ten lessons that I have learned about promoting dialogue in a polarised political environment.

1. *Be open to dialogue*. Speaking to one's opponent does not mean automatically agreeing with them or showing weakness. It means that one is willing to engage and listen, and that one has the confidence to present and defend one's views.

2. *Don't close doors from the outset*. Keep channels of communication open. This may mean talking to people who one does not agree with or even officially recognise. But dialogue, e.g. with non-armed state actors, does not mean official recognition. It may simply be a necessity. Think of how the International Committee of the Red Cross or other humanitarian actors need to do their job in war zones.

3. *If necessary, involve a third party*. If bilateral dialogue is not possible, involve a third party. This may be a mediator or a facilitator. If the parties do not want to internationalise the conflict, you can choose a private mediator. There are quite a number of highly professional non-governmental mediators are out there. There is the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) based in Geneva or the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) founded by Finnish Nobel laureate Martti Ahtisaari, to name just two of the most prominent ones.

4. *Don't be afraid to spell out differences*. Parties involved in dialogue want to be heard. So let them outline their positions – even though the other side is probably aware of them already. But in the process, the opposing sides will feel that they have been given an opportunity to make clear what their positions (and maybe even red lines) are.

5. *Seek common ground*. Once positions have been laid out and differences are clear, look for any areas where interests converge. It may be big, vague issues like both sides saying that they want to avoid war, or it may be small, precise points like the sides needing to share a common resource like water or have peace to restore basic services. Identify common benefits.

6. *Design a process that has costs and benefits.* The opposing parties may need incentives to engage in dialogue, and they will have to see that there are benefits in engaging in the process. But there should also be a cost or costs for arbitrarily abandoning the negotiation. Furthermore, a negotiation can have benefits for both sides. Rather than a zero-sum, winner-takes-all equation, it should be demonstrated that dialogue and cooperation can be mutually beneficial.

7. *Remember reciprocity*. In a polarised political climate, usually a tit-for-tat logic can be in place. One side does something and the other responds in kind. This can lead to an escalation of rhetoric, bad faith, and even violence. But this pattern of behaviour can be turned around in a positive way. If one side takes a positive step, e.g. a confidence-building measure, and the other side reciprocates, then trust can be slowly built and positions become less polarised.

8. *Be aware of spoilers*. There are always people who profit from polarisation and instability. It is important to understand who they are and what their motivations are – and to understand how they can either be brought into the process or prevented from spoiling it.

9. *Trust is not a prerequisite for dialogue*. Sometimes people say that it is impossible for two sides to come together because there is no trust. However, one reason to promote dialogue or confidence-building measures is to build trust. Even in difficult situations, cooperation can be an outcome rather than a prerequisite. The key is to get the parties together, get them talking, and look for common ground.

10. *Cooperation is cumulative*. Cooperation takes time. The development of personal contacts, participation in common projects, and joint ownership of common processes can build bonds that bring people from opposing sides closer together. There may be setbacks along the way, but experience shows – including in the example of the SMM that I referred to earlier – that it is possible to promote dialogue in a highly polarised political setting.

With this in mind, I hope that renewed efforts can be made to bridge divides within societies and between states. We hear, for example, that it is pointless to talk to the other side in polarised political environments. But this leads to a dead end: positions become entrenched, there is political gridlock, and problems accumulate instead of being resolved.

As I mentioned at the beginning, it is not enough to talk to people who share your views, otherwise we will congregate in echo chambers – nodding and

applauding opinions that reflect our own, and demonising those we do not share. This is exactly what I am currently observing. This will not enable us to tackle complex challenges.

Therefore, we need safe spaces for dialogue – spaces where non-like-minded people can meet. That is a role that Switzerland often plays, as demonstrated most recently in the Summit between Presidents Biden and Putin in Geneva in June. And it is a role played by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, where I am the Director: we pride ourselves on our independence, inclusiveness and impartiality. We provide safe spaces where people of all relevant political currents can meet and exchange ideas.

I hope that I have been able to point to approaches and characteristics that you will find helpful in your work in public governance and diplomacy.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to discussing some of these points with you in greater detail.