



Winning the Peace: The Role of Agonistic and Adaptive Peacebuilding in Sustaining Social Cohesion in Ukraine

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Received: 10 April 2024 | Accepted: 20 July 2024 |

Published online: 18 December 2024

Abstract

This article analyzes the role that Ukrainian peacebuilders play in contributing to strengthening social cohesion in war-time Ukraine. It studies an initiative to facilitate dialogue between two jurisdictions of the Orthodox church to develop new insights into the role that dialogue facilitation and peace mediation can play as a form of internal peacebuilding. We analyze and assess these dialogue practices in Ukraine from the perspective of two theoretical approaches, namely agonistic peace and adaptive peacebuilding. The efforts of Ukrainian dialogue facilitators and peacebuilders have received little international attention and support, despite the fact that ambitious plans are underway to help rebuild Ukraine, and significant amounts of money are being mobilized for this effort. Our hope is that these efforts will involve the Ukrainian peacebuilding community in their work in order to ensure that their reconstruction efforts are conflict sensitive and peace positive.

Keywords

Ukraine – social cohesion – peacebuilding – peace mediation – sustaining peace

This article is about the role that Ukrainian peacebuilders play in maintaining and further strengthening social cohesion in war-time Ukraine. Several articles in this special edition analyze the prospects and pitfalls of peace through victory in Ukraine. In this article, we focus on the dialogue and peace mediation activities that are being undertaken in Ukraine to help maintain social cohesion during the war. Instead of focusing on how to end the war, we are interested in the role that internal social cohesion plays in enabling Ukrainian society to sustain its resolve to defend itself against Russian aggression. More specifically, our focus is on understanding the roles that dialogue and peace mediation play as part of an internal peacebuilding process in this specific context.⁵

5 Peacebuilding and mediation are usually seen as distinct but related processes and each have their own communities of practice, separate policy processes and institutions and epistemic literatures. In this article we analyze how Ukrainian peacebuilders make use of a combination of shuttle diplomacy and dialogue to achieve a peacebuilding aim, namely to maintain and further strengthen social cohesion. In this Ukrainian case, the terms peacebuilding, me-

How to win the war with Russia without losing the peace in Ukraine is a critically important question for Ukraine's future (Pekar 2023). Within Ukraine and beyond, winning the war is associated with the moral argument that if the Ukrainian defense against the Russian aggression is regarded by international law as a just war, it ought to end in a just peace. In that context, victory is primarily seen through re-gaining territorial integrity and national sovereignty, as reflected in President Zelensky's peace plan. Our approach is complementary to this peace through victory perspective. We focus on an additional element, which we frame as winning the peace, and which we understand as the capacity of the Ukrainian society to maintain and strengthen social cohesion during the war and after the victory. Losing the peace would imply a scenario where Ukraine is militarily victorious but subsequently suffers from internal political and social instability. Winning the peace is thus an active effort to prevent the losing the peace scenario by investing in efforts to strengthen and maintain social cohesion.

The focus on winning the peace becomes even more urgent when it is recognized that Ukraine is not only defending itself against a powerful military aggressor, it is also defending itself against a hybrid war that is waged over the political and cultural identity of Ukraine. In this context, maintaining and strengthening social cohesion is a critical enabler of the resolve that the Ukrainian state and people need to successfully defend themselves.

Social cohesion is generated and sustained not only by the policies, laws, and actions of the institutions of the state, but also by the everyday social practices of formal and informal social institutions, civil society, and ordinary people (Mac Ginty 2021). There are important efforts underway in Ukrainian society and by Ukrainian peacebuilders to sustain social cohesion and to prevent societal instability. Since at least 2014, there has been an active community of dialogue facilitators and peacebuilders that have through different initiatives and projects worked to sustain peace within Ukraine.

In this article we focus on one such example, namely an initiative to facilitate dialogue between two jurisdictions of the Orthodox church. Religious institutions can play an important role in sustaining social cohesion, but the tensions that have developed between these two jurisdictions of the Orthodox church contributed to polarizing narratives that were undermining social cohesion in Ukraine. Working to reduce tensions and improve relations between these two jurisdictions is thus an important investment in strengthening social cohesion in Ukraine.

diation and dialogue are closely inter-connected, and that is also the way we use these terms in this article.

Two of the authors of this paper are Ukrainian peacebuilders who are engaged in various peacebuilding processes in Ukraine. They are both directly involved in the dialogue process with the two jurisdictions of the Orthodox church. The remaining two authors are international peace scholars. The aim of this collaborative effort is to improve our knowledge and understanding of the Ukrainian peacebuilding experience by analyzing it using two theoretical approaches, namely agonistic peace and adaptive peacebuilding.

Agonistic peace theory offers an alternative perspective to make sense of and to conceptualize the practices of Ukrainian peacebuilders to address and cope with social tensions that emerge, or are exacerbated, under the pressures of war. Agonistic peace refers to society's capacity to maintain social cohesion and to mitigate potential social tension whilst allowing for and valuing diverse, even peacefully conflicting opinions and identifications (Lehti 2025). We also consider how framing these dialogue practices as part of an adaptive peacebuilding approach can assist Ukrainian peacebuilders to cope with the complexities and uncertainties of the social transition processes they are trying to influence. Adaptive peacebuilding foregrounds context specific and participatory approaches to sustaining peace with the objective of empowering communities and their social institutions, to play the leading role in managing and resolving those tensions through an iterative and inductive process of self-organized learning from practice (de Coning 2018).

In order to relate the work of the Ukrainian dialogue facilitators that we are studying in this paper with the international peace and conflict studies research community, we use concepts like peacebuilding and peace mediation, whilst recognizing that these concepts have been developed in a different context and fit poorly with the Ukrainian context. During the past decades international peacebuilding and peace mediation have become increasingly specialized in responding to internal conflicts and processes, mostly in the Global South. Questions related to peacebuilding during or after interstate wars have received little attention in peace and conflict studies over the last few decades.

As a result, the international peace research community and peacebuilding practitioners were ill-prepared for the Russian war against Ukraine and struggled to apply the theories and approaches that have been developed and refined over the last few decades to the Ukrainian reality. However, Ukrainian peacebuilders and peace researchers have been dealing with the tensions between Russia and Ukraine and its effects on Ukrainian society for more than a decade and have adapted their peacebuilding practices to this particular con-

text (Kyselova 2024). The Ukraine case thus offers a unique opportunity for the peace and conflict research community as well as for peace practitioners to study the practices and significance of internal peacebuilding during an ongoing war where one state is defending itself against the aggression of another.

The efforts of Ukrainian dialogue facilitators and peacebuilders have received little international attention and support, despite the fact that ambitious plans are underway to help rebuild Ukraine, and significant amounts of money are being mobilized for this effort. Our hope is that this article will alert those involved in planning reconstruction efforts in Ukraine of the importance of the work that local and national peacebuilders are doing in Ukraine, and that they will involve the Ukrainian peacebuilding community in their work in order to ensure that their reconstruction efforts are conflict sensitive and peace positive, i.e. that they are designed to contribute to sustaining social cohesion and further strengthening social resilience and adaptive capacity.

To summarize, we have three aims with this article. Firstly, to strengthen Ukrainian peacebuilding efforts by helping them to understand their context and work from an international peace studies perspective. Secondly, to enhance international peace research by improving our understanding of the role that domestic and local peacebuilding and peace mediation can play in consolidating and sustaining social cohesion in a country during an ongoing interstate war. Thirdly, to inform the efforts that are underway to help rebuild Ukraine, by making those responsible aware of the work of the Ukrainian peacebuilding community and to alert them to the need to ensure that the reconstruction efforts are conflict sensitive and peace positive.

In the next section we introduce and analyze the identity war that Russia is waging in Ukraine, and the risks that this poses for social cohesions and sustaining peace in Ukraine. Thereafter we introduce and discuss agonistic peace as a theoretical framework that combines peacebuilding, social cohesion, and identities as a site of war and peace. Then we give a broad overview of the work that Ukrainian peacebuilders are doing in Ukraine. This is followed by an introduction to adaptive peacebuilding that helps to explain how the Ukrainian community of dialogue practitioners cope with the complexities, uncertainty, and unpredictability of sustaining internal peace during an ongoing interstate war. We then go into the empirical case study of the dialogue process involving the two jurisdictions of the Orthodox Church, which we analyze using the two theoretical frameworks. In conclusion we bring theory and the empirical case together and conclude with some recommendations for the peacebuilding during war and for the international reconstruction effort in Ukraine.

Peace, Social Cohesion, and the Identity War in Ukraine

Most states are made up of societies within which a diversity of identity groups coexist. Part of the state formation process is the tendency to forge an overarching national identity narrative that ties these different identity groups together. In times of war or violent conflict identities become an important instrument for mobilizing support for one side or the other. When communities experience existential threat, prevailing anxiety is often addressed by securitizing national identity narratives and unconditional uniformity is seen as a prerequisite for social cohesion (Mälksoo 2015; Rumelili 2015). Still, uniformity is always an illusion and something that can be approached only by exclusion and forceful unification as seen in the state formation experiences of countries like France, Germany, and Italy. Identities are fluid and multi-faceted and individuals, families and groups have multiple identities.

In this context, as we have seen in the Balkans, Rwanda, Myanmar, and elsewhere, identity markers like language or religion can easily become weaponized, and these cultural markers can become a simplistic indicator of assumed associated loyalty to one or other cause. Russia's war against Ukraine is a textbook example of weaponizing identity as part of a total war strategy, as its aim is to question and undermine the notion that there is an Ukrainian identity—politically and culturally—that exists independently from Russia. In several speeches before the start of the war on 24 February 2022 and also after the war started, President Putin attempted to legitimize the war through historical narratives that undermine and deny that the Ukrainian state and people have a claim to their own identity and sovereignty (Putin 2021). Since 2014, Russia's hybrid warfare operatives have been generating historical narratives that weaponized local identities, especially in the Donbas and other regions bordering Russia, to fragment and polarize Ukrainian society. In addition to the military invasion in Ukraine, Russia has thus also been waging an identity war against Ukraine. In this war, the center of gravity is the degree to which Ukraine can consolidate and sustain its social cohesion. As the war enters its third year, trends within Ukrainian society are also gradually shifting. The population has maintained a high level of horizontal social cohesion (people-to-people), except for certain critical issues such as language and mobilization. However, vertical social cohesion (people-to-state) has decreased. Trust in state institutions has declined and there is a growing readiness for potential peace negotiations (NDI 2024). Even in the context of an overall decrease in trust of the government, the quality of relations between citizens and the state experienced a strong increase in 2023. Still, the strongest driver of social cohesion is the sense of belonging to the country, and keeping the pluralistic Ukrainian identity of

the society which is directly connected to the overall culture of dialogue in Ukrainian society (SCORE 2023).

This is the context within which the tensions between the two jurisdictions of the Orthodox Church play out. The Orthodox Church in Ukraine is an example of how questions of religious and national identity are intertwined in complex ways that manifest both in terms of how formal institutions like a church evolve, as well as how individual, family, and village identities develop in close association with local institutions like a specific local church (Brylov & Kalenychenko 2023). In the case of Ukraine, individual, family, village, and regional identities have been formed by historical, cultural, religious, and linguistic markers. Some of these – especially language and other markers of ‘Russianness’ – have been exacerbated by events such as the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian support for separatist movements and forces in the east, and the open invasion and war since February 2022 (Rating group 2023). Russia has used the protection of Russian language rights and Russian minorities as a justification for its annexation of Crimea and its involvement in and support for Russian separatist movements and forces in eastern Ukraine (BBC 2014). In February 2022, the Russian parliament recognized the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic in Eastern Ukraine as independent states.

In response to the Russian aggression, especially since the full-scale invasion and war that started on 24 February 2022, there has been an upswell in Ukrainian nationalism. Before the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and before the Russian war on Ukraine, Ukrainian identity included a certain degree of Russianness. However, in response to these aggressions and their justifications, a new type of Ukrainian national identity has emerged that distances itself from Russianness. This new Ukrainian nationalism manifests in part through opposition to the use of the Russian language and other Russian cultural symbols, such as the Russian Orthodox church. However, as the popular phrase “*Aby ne moskal*” indicates, the opposition to Russianness is directed more at the government in Moscow, i.e. the Russian state identified with President Putin, rather than at the Russian nation or Russian people. The driver behind the new Ukrainian identity is thus an identification of Moscow as an existential political and military threat, rather than a rejection of Russian culture, language, and people (Dziobak 2023).

Whilst these identity-based tensions were an underlying part of Ukrainian society before the war, as in many other societies in the world, they have been manipulated and weaponized in the territorial conflicts in the east by Russia and its proxies (Kim 2023). In response, the pushback against Russianness has become a central part of a new Ukrainian national state and nation consol-

idation process, especially since the start of the war in February 2022. These tensions have become especially acute around discussions about different scenarios for ending the war.

During the war, some elements of society have tried to establish a more uniform, and therefore exclusive, identity of what it means to be Ukrainian. This has increased tensions within and between families, villages, and institutions. These tensions have been most visible where Russian colonial or imperial heritage is embedded in emotionally strong identities, like in the case of identity with religious institutions. In this context, social cohesion as well as societal stability is progressively at risk. If this trend remains unaddressed, the risk of hate speech, hate crimes, discrimination and other forms of internal social insecurity can grow to a point where it can start to seriously undermine the social unity needed to sustain the Ukrainian war effort. If Ukraine can achieve its objectives on the battlefield, then there is a risk that these unresolved social tensions can undermine Ukraine's ability to secure and consolidate the peace (Rescore 2023).

Agonistic Peace

In this study we are interested in how peacebuilding and mediation can enhance social cohesion during interstate war by coping with and mitigating all kinds of contestations towards national identity and identity of state. Identity is regarded as important for social cohesion, but it should be noted that uniformity is just an illusion. In the messy real-world identities are fluid, layered, and intersecting. Peacebuilding cannot meaningfully aim to transform the differences between identities. For Brubaker and Cooper (2000), identity is not a useful category of analysis at all because it is always contingent. Instead, focusing on identification as something processual and active introduces a more appropriate perspective to comprehend how peacebuilding practice can enhance social cohesion.

Agonistic peace introduces a theoretical perspective of peacebuilding that gives an analytical frame to signify how peacebuilding practice can address identification processes instead of discussing transformation of identities. Instead of comprehending peacebuilding as a post-conflict process aimed at consolidating peace after war or mediation among conflict parties to end the war during conflict, agonistic peace introduces a new approach to peace that transcends the war-peace juxtaposition. Therefore, it helps to conceptualize practices for sustaining peace within Ukraine even during war as peacebuilding. However, this would require expanding existing agonistic peacebuilding literature beyond post-conflict settings (Lehti 2014). It would also imply reconceptualizing agonistic peacebuilding as a capacity of a pluralistic society to

mitigate internal tensions and to avoid escalation and exclusion even during an ongoing interstate war. This switch brings agonistic peacebuilding closer to its philosophical origin in the agonism democracy debate (Wenman 2013).

Agonistic peace aims to broaden peacebuilding beyond its conventional conflict resolution paradigm and deliberative routines. Agonistic theory has been inspired by the French philosopher Chantal Mouffe, to whom “agonism is a way to mitigate antagonism’s violent dispositions and a possibility of turning conflict into a means for constructive political dynamics” (Martín, Hansen, & Grondona 2022: 1271). Agonistic theory places special emphasis on antagonizing forms of politics and identification as an essence of violent conflict but also comprehends antagonism as a dimension of politics that “can never be eradicated.” To prevent escalation or radicalization of antagonism there is need for agonistic “practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting” (Mouffe 2009: 550). Agonistic theory contests liberal rationalism and its illusion that antagonism can be resolved. Agonistic pluralism is the term Mouffe is using to explore how democratic, or any form of egalitarian, society can organize political interaction in a way that enables coping with antagonism so that the emergence of violent polarizations and fundamentalism is prevented (Wenman 2013: 109–11, 193–97).

The agonistic approach departs unidirectionality from conflict transformation and emphasizes instead the ability of societies to cope with antagonizing tendencies, i.e. the ability to mitigate potential antagonism into agonism. Peace is then about practices for coping with the ever-present threat of violent polarizations. Agonistic peace emphasizes the importance of dialogue that is not aimed at a solution, but rather at informal or thin recognition of parties (Lehti 2025). Agonistic peacebuilding literature has been interested in how these kinds of agonistic practices of peace can be revived and recreated after violent conflict has disrupted them, but also how communities preserve capacities for enabling pockets of peace in which interaction among antagonizing parties is enabled (Lehti 2014; Lehti & Romashov 2022). The case of Ukrainian dialogue practitioners does not fit neatly in these categories, but it offers an alternative perspective that can help to reconfigure agonistic peace as the capacity to maintain adaptiveness of agonistic practices.

What is a common denominator for all cases of agonistic peacebuilding and what agonistic democracy theories do not discuss is entanglement of agonistic peace to ontological security. The war transforms identifications in a more exclusive direction and addressing these transformations is essential for enhancing peace (Jabri 1996). The setting becomes more complex when weaponizing identity and heritage is an elementary part of conflict. Ontological security the-

ories explain how during on-going violent conflicts in which radical disagreement prevails among conflicting parties (Ramsbotham 2010) antagonizing and exclusive forms of identification often offer certainty and conformity (Lehti & Romashov 2022). Paradoxically, as Flockhart (2016: 806) reminds, 'being ontological[ly] secure does not mean having a stable identity'; rather, it is about a community's ability to cope with diversity and/or 'dislocatory events' within a continuously changing world (Lehti & Romashov 2022). Lehti and Romashov (2022: 1292) argue that building or maintaining agonistic peace is about "the investment required to increase societal capability to cope with uncertainties and a diversity of narratives represents a valid but difficult path to enable agonism."

According to Lehti and Romashov (2022: 1292) there needs to be made "a distinction between the two different realities of experiencing ontological security—one where the hegemony of antagonism prevails and the other where agonistic pluralism suppresses antagonism." Agonistic peacebuilding has been so far interested in "the question... how to escape the hegemonic control of antagonism and enable agonistic pluralism, or agonistic peace." The dilemma, from a peacebuilding perspective, is that seeking for ontological security may constitute a major obstacle for opening the road to peace as the process for peace may generate anxiety (Rumelili 2015) and contesting hegemonic narratives is experienced as an existential question and change that generates an anxiety 'which may push agents to take action they would not otherwise have considered' (Flockhart 2016: 803). Then agonistic peacebuilding is about enabling 'anxiety-management' (Lehti & Romashov 2022).

The Ukrainian example introduces an alternative case for agonistic peace as it is an example of how informal agonistic practices of peace sustain agonistic pluralism within Ukraine even during the interstate war. At the current stage of the war dialogue and agonistic peacebuilding is not possible between the Ukrainian and Russian states, as deep radical disagreement prevails. However, the original idea of agonistic pluralism appears in new light in the context of a state having to defend itself against a war of aggression. In this context, agonistic peace is about strengthening and reviving new practices to mitigate potential violent dispositions, sources of antagonism, and polarization within Ukrainian society and preserve something that can be called agonistic pluralism or agonistic peace within Ukraine. This perspective to peacebuilding is as radical as it suggests, and our hypothesis is that internal peacebuilding or peace mediation during an interstate war, like in Ukraine, can support societal cohesion and its capacity to cope with an ever-present potential for antagonism.

Agonistic peacebuilding is also then associated with ontological security and anxiety-management. When agonistic pluralism prevails, the diversity of

narratives is tolerated, and even though “dislocatory events” generate “anxiety,” there is “‘basic trust’ which can limit anxiety to a manageable level” (Flockhart 2016: 803). The Ukrainian case instead leads us to question how to preserve internal agonistic pluralism, or agonistic peace, during interstate war. Agonistic peacebuilding is then about practices to create and support experiences of agonism in everyday contexts within Ukraine while the hegemony of antagonism prevails at the interstate level between Ukraine and Russia.

The Role of Peacebuilding and Peace Mediation in Ukraine

Since 2014, a number of Ukrainian peacebuilding organizations and other social institutions have been proactively working to prevent and contain this kind of societal instability by resolving specific disputes and promoting dialogue and other peace mediation practices that can sustain and strengthen social cohesion (Kyselova 2019). It is important to point out from the beginning that the field of peacebuilding in Ukraine began to develop long before 2014 or 2022, although the focus on social cohesion expanded and professionalized under the influence of international partners after 2014. Ukrainian peacebuilding and dialogue networks and communities of practice are well-developed, but not all of the organizations involved would necessarily self-identify as peacebuilders. The motivation of Ukrainian practitioners to create norms regulating dialogue facilitation, as well as the very process of norm formulation, was strongly impacted by existing conceptions of dialogue and mediation brought to Ukraine by external peacebuilding organizations (Axyonova & Kyselova 2024).

The peculiarity of the Ukrainian sphere of peacebuilding is that it is domestically led, and that the work takes place across a number of tracks and scales (Millar 2020). Peacebuilding in Ukraine includes, amongst others:

- participation and facilitation of decision-making at the government level;
- work at the level of territorial communities within the framework of decentralization and establishment of communication between representatives of local authorities, businesses, and activists;
- work on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of war veterans after their service;
- conflict-sensitive work with war victims and cooperation with psychologists, lawyers, and religious ministers;
- support for human rights specialists who are leading the peacebuilding efforts and request for justice in Ukraine;
- development and implementation of various educational programs and trainings on dialogue practices;

- promotion of conflict sensitive approach in different social interventions and projects;
- conducting the research and analysis of social/conflict dynamics in order to promote and empower a culture of dialogue and social cohesion;
- supporting schools in their work to establish restorative practices among parents, teachers, and students; and
- various formats and types of mediation, including family, business, and criminal cases, etc.

Peacebuilding in Ukraine is a systematic work at all levels of society done by the government, civil society institutions, and people of Ukraine, sometimes with help of the international community (Kyselova 2019). Peacebuilding is understood as a component of a broader set of policies that is needed to steer Ukraine through a transitional period whilst it is defending itself against a foreign invasion. In this context, we can distinguish between three types of peacebuilding work in Ukraine since 2014, namely: peacebuilding as such; a peacebuilding component of other transitional policies (transitional justice, informational reintegration policy, etc.); and organizational activities that enable and support peacebuilding activities (Kyselova, Kliuzhev, & Lunova 2021).

The war that started in February 2022 influenced peacebuilding work in Ukraine in a number of ways. On the one hand, the basic principles of dialogue facilitation and the need to promote understanding and tolerance between different identity groups remained unchanged. On the other hand, it became impossible and unethical to continue with dialogue initiatives in and with territories not under the control of the government of Ukraine. The general focus of the peacebuilding community also shifted to strengthening and maintaining internal social cohesion in Ukraine. The war also had an impact on the sense of unity among Ukrainian peacebuilders. In addition to promoting the interests of the state and Ukrainian society in the international arena, the peacebuilding community also started to work more closely together to find resources and partnerships, and to resolve old divisions among people. The community focused on identifying and articulating a common vision, and this resulted in the Ukrainian peacebuilding community making two public appeals to the international community since the start of the war in 2022. The first was released by the national peacebuilding community in the form of a manifesto entitled “Seven points on war and dialogue in Ukraine” (Public Manifesto 2022). It demanded that the international community should not initiate peace initiatives with Russia on behalf of Ukraine, and invoked the “nothing about us, without us” mantra to claim the peace mediation space for the Ukrainian peace community. It was a powerful act to show that in Ukraine

the peacebuilding and peace mediation space is dominated by a vibrant local and national peacebuilding community. It also called on international actors, organizations, and media to recognize that there is a wide range of local peacebuilding initiatives underway in Ukraine. The second public appeal (Public Manifesto 2023) was developed by the Ukrainian Community of Dialogue Practitioners that are involved in directly implementing projects to resolve conflicts and build sustainable peace.

Even before the start of the war, Ukrainian conflict resolution specialists had their own practices and understanding of peacebuilding, although it was not institutionalized, and it was not practiced systematically across the whole country. Since the start of the war peacebuilding and peace mediation work has expanded and is now taking place at a much broader scale and across multiple scales. Ukrainian peacebuilders have developed a wide range of specializations and gained first-hand practical experience and as a result they developed context-specific peacebuilding and peace mediation practices. Since 2014, a large proportion of peacebuilding work has concentrated on the east and south of the country. Ukrainian peacebuilders were also involved in the integration of internally displaced persons and returning veterans. It is important to recognize and build on the experience of the Ukrainian peacebuilding community, as it can inform and steer the recovery and reconstruction efforts that are getting underway with significant international support. This local knowledge and experience will be crucial to prevent international peace and reconstruction efforts from causing negative unintended consequences that can undermine social cohesion.

Adaptive Peacebuilding

Adaptive peacebuilding is a conceptual framework that may be helpful to analyze the Ukrainian community of dialogue practitioners and their approach to peacebuilding. Adaptive peacebuilding is a normative and functional approach to sustaining peace that is aimed at navigating the complexity inherent in trying to nudge societal change processes towards peace without causing harm (de Coning 2018). Adaptive peacebuilding is a conscious effort to decolonize peacebuilding by moving away from an approach based on predetermined values, models, and standards. Instead, the focus is on empowering the agency of the affected communities and societies to learn from their own attempts to sustain peace.

The situation in Ukraine is characterized by complexity and uncertainty. Adaptive peacebuilding is an approach to peacebuilding that is based on Com-

plexity Theory, which is a theory about how complex systems, including social systems, behave under pressure (Cilliers 1998). If social systems are ontologically complex, then their behavior can be understood as highly dynamic and non-linear. As a result, it is not possible to make sense of or predict specific future behavior of such systems using deductive theoretical approaches based on the past behavior of similar systems, or even the same system in a different context. Understanding social systems as complex also implies a recognition that these systems emerge, evolve, and are sustained by the self-organizing effects of the relationships between the elements that make up the system, which in social systems are individuals, groups and institutions (Luhmann 1990). Adaptive peacebuilding is an approach to peacebuilding and peace mediation that is designed to cope with this uncertainty and unpredictability of complex systems. It makes use of an inductive learning-by-doing approach to knowledge development and peacebuilding practice. It makes sense of the context specificity of the conflict through proactive and directed experimentation and exploration that involves the people affected by the situation. In this way, adaptive peacebuilding is a bottom-up process of knowledge generation, sense-making, and peacebuilding practice (de Coning 2018). It is thus different from the concept of liberal peace, where a pre-conceived set of values and methodologies, based on Western experiences and concepts of peace, are understood to predetermine what a specific peacebuilding process should produce, regardless of context (Richmond 2016).

As the experiences from Ukraine in this article demonstrate, one cannot have only one peacebuilding or peace mediation approach for the whole of Ukraine. Each community needs to find its own context-specific solutions, through its own home-grown emergent process of trying—and sometimes failing—to resolve its inter-communal or other tensions and conflicts. Each context will also have its own unique set of stakeholders that have their own interests and historic relationships. Adaptive peacebuilding is designed to facilitate this kind of context-specific adaptation, as it provides a framework for involving local stakeholders in dialogue and other peacebuilding practices.

Adaptive peacebuilding shifts the focus from peace as an end-goal to be achieved at some point in the future to peace as experienced in the present, emergent from the process of continuously working everyday towards sustaining and further strengthening the peace present in a given society (de Coning 2016). In the Ukraine context, this means that whilst the content and timing of the final outcome of the war is uncertain, the intermediate goal is to build social cohesion and sustain societal stability, including by preventing and managing tensions between different identity groups in the present (Paffenholtz 2021).

Social cohesion may mean different things for different communities and institutions. The specific goals and processes should thus be determined by the participants in the communities or institutions themselves. The practice of reaching agreements on goals and processes is also an exercise of building trust and creating a shared understanding of the nature of the problem to be addressed. When the adaptive peacebuilding framework has been applied to peace mediation, it was found that the outcome of dialogue processes is more sustainable when it emerges from the active engagement and participation of the affected communities and people (de Coning, Muto, & Saraiva 2022). When people affected by conflict feel that they have been involved in shaping the outcome of peace agreements, they also feel a sense of responsibility to sustain the institutions and processes necessary to sustain that peace (de Coning, Saraiva & Muto 2023).

Intra-religious Dialogue in Ukraine

Our empirical case study that demonstrates the kind of work Ukrainian peacebuilders and dialogue practitioners are involved in is an intra-Orthodox dialogue between two competing and conflicting jurisdictions of the Orthodox Church—the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (of Moscow Patriarchate, i.e. УОС-МП) and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). Until recently, the УОС-МП was an autonomous church within the Russian Orthodox Church, uniting more than a third of all parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Ukraine. After the Russian invasion in February 2022, the УОС-МП announced the severance of administrative ties with the ROC, nevertheless maintaining the canonical connection. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine was born in 2018 from the unification of different pro-independence Orthodox jurisdictions in Ukraine, including the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kyiv Patriarchate (УОС-КР), and parts of the УОС-МП that chose to break away from the Moscow Patriarchate. The OCU is the entity officially recognized as autocephalous by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (Brylov, Kalenychenko, & Kryshtal 2023).

Before 2014, the УОС-МП was the largest religious organization in Ukraine, uniting about 12 thousand communities. After the annexation of Crimea and the emergence of separatist enclaves in eastern Ukraine, its dominance began to decline. In 2019, with the support of President Petro Poroshenko, who made the issue of creating an autocephalous (independent) church in Ukraine part of his election program, the OCU gained independence from Patriarch Bartholomew. After this, some communities that had a pronounced pro-Ukrainian

orientation moved from the UOC-MP to the OCU. The UOC-MP received the main blow to its image and attitude from broad sections of Ukrainian society after the Russian invasion in February 2022, when cooperation between UOC-MP priests and Russian troops became public knowledge. The conflict between the two jurisdictions escalated when a public discourse developed that asserted that all communities of the UOC-MP that have not transferred to the OCU were covert collaborators and agents of the Russian secret services.

As a result, public opinion and the attitude of the authorities towards the UOC-MP rapidly deteriorated, up to the active popularization of the idea of banning the UOC-MP. Opponents of the UOC-MP in the government said that the ban was not directed against Orthodoxy, but against any religious organizations with a center control in the aggressor country. Despite similar pressure from public opinion and the Ukrainian authorities (both central and local administrations), mass transitions from the UOC-MP to the OCU did not occur (Interactive map 2023).

The discord among the two jurisdictions of the Orthodox Church has a broad societal significance in Ukraine because of its immersion in the peculiarities of the Ukrainian social context. It brings to the fore how questions of religion and the church lie at the intersection of identity, history, and issues of cultural affiliation; of personal, community, and national identification; and of national, colonial, and imperial legacies, all of which find their reflection in religious and church affiliation. In Ukraine, the issue of Orthodox affiliation has become relevant not only for believers, but also for secular people, as it is perceived as a marker of cultural affiliation.

As a result of the tensions and developments mentioned earlier, stalemate had developed. On the one hand, the UOC-MP was experiencing an internal crisis, when a significant part of parishioners and ordinary priests took a pro-Ukrainian position and expected active actions to dissociate the UOC-MP from the Russian Orthodox Church at all levels. At the same time, the episcopate of the UOC-MP took a predominantly wait-and-see position, and individual bishops took a pro-Moscow position. On the other hand, the OCU did not receive recognition from the majority of autocephalous Orthodox churches, and was also unable to attract most of the UOC-MP communities to its side, losing to the latter according to many infrastructural criteria. On the third hand, the state took an irreconcilable position, actually forcing the UOC-MP to merge with the OCU on the latter's terms.

The idea of dialogue between the two Orthodox denominations was rejected by the leadership of both churches and was not particularly welcomed by the authorities, who at the same time referred to public opinion as determining the state-confessional policy (UPTS MP 2023). Public opinion, no matter

what is meant by it in conditions of war and military censorship, is also inclined to ban the UOC-MP.

The dialogue process started after several requests from the clergy of both jurisdictions to have a platform where it is possible to talk in a safe and calm space. Colleagues who are co-authors of this article responded to this request, as they envisioned how to create such a space and guarantee safety for dialogue participants. The process design needed to be sensitive, too, and required separate meetings before the groups could meet together. The overall process started in September 2022 as soon as it was possible to organize due to the safety risks in Ukraine at that time. Local peacebuilders—with the financial support of the US Institute of Peace (USIP)—facilitated a series of confidential meetings with the participation of clergy at all levels, from parish priests to bishops, representing both churches, as well as active laity and the experts in religious studies from both denominations. It should be mentioned that the very idea of dialogue was formed after a field study was conducted that assessed the peacebuilding potential of religious communities in Ukraine (Brylov, Kalenychenko, & Kryshstal 2021). This research was conducted in several regions of Ukraine on the basis of qualitative sociology methods, in particular, semi-structured in-depth interviews. The study found that both Orthodox jurisdictions seemed to see themselves as irreconcilable adversaries. However, during the first months of full-scale invasion we received several personal and group requests for dialogue. In the process of the design preparation, we used participant observation, actors and content mapping and expert confidential interviews. In addition, at the first stage of the dialogue, we engaged two religious scholars, who are experts in Ukrainian Orthodoxy and represent the two jurisdictions, to each develop their own internal analysis of both parties, and they were engaged as consultant-mediators in the process.

Complete confidentiality and non-publicity of the meetings was maintained for the reasons mentioned earlier, and because there were fears that the dialogue meetings could breakdown because of the low levels of trust, both on the part of the “hawks” within the episcopate of both churches, and on the part of the authorities. In addition, confidentiality made it possible to attract representatives of the episcopate from both sides, who, in the event of any publicity, would be forced to take the official position of their church about the impossibility of any negotiations with the opposing side.

The design of the dialogue meetings included several stages. At the first stage, there were preparatory meetings in groups of up to 6-8 people, during which each church formulated their request for dialogue with the opposing party. For example, for representatives of the OCU, a “non-discussable” issue was the recognition of the validity of their consecrations (ordinations) by

representatives of the UOC-MP. Expected topics and overall aim were also discussed by the members of both groups.

The next stage took the format of shuttle diplomacy in the form of one-sided consultations, in which each group received feedback from the organizers with the demands and conditions of the opposite side. At the third stage, a joint meeting was held, at which each party, in the format of a face-to-face meeting, was able to discuss issues that were previously recognized by both parties as permissible for discussion. It is important to note that despite the harsh confrontation between the churches during this period of the dialogue, they were eventually able to reach a consolidated position, which opened up the opportunity for the expansion and intensification of the intra-Orthodox dialogue.

However, at this moment, the Ukrainian authorities escalated the conflict, as a result of which the UOC-MP lost the opportunity to use the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, also known as a Kyivan cave monastery. As a result, representatives of the UOC-MP suspended their participation in the dialogue and we continued our work in even more closed offline meetings of key participants than before.

It is important to note that the consideration of enemies as opponents, that can be negotiated with within a clearly defined framework, and the recognition of their right to have their own values, postulated by the agonistic approach, played a constructive role in this case. Moreover, despite the deterioration of the general situation and the increased hostility of the environment, during the dialogues on the agonistic peacebuilding model (in the first place, building “basic trust” between participants) between representatives of both churches, informal communication channels were formed, which continue to operate even after the change in the design of the peacebuilding process, which we were forced to adapt in the face of opposition to dialogue with side of the state.

From the perspectives of the peacebuilders that facilitated these intra-orthodox dialogues, the dialogue process—even when they were informal and perhaps unconventional—was understood as a form of informal multi-track adaptive mediation (Lederach 1997). The form that the dialogue process took corresponds well with the emphasis of the agonistic peace approach on the recognition of irreconcilable diversity and dialogue. The aim of the intra-Orthodox dialogue is not to resolve the diversity, or to look for a clear solution or final agreement, but rather to build informal recognition of each side's situation and to seek pathways to coexist within Ukraine. In this context, one aim was to mitigate or dilute the ongoing antagonization of the relationship between the two churches.

On the other hand, in practice it was impossible to mobilize both parties without some kind of goal for the dialogue process. A goal motivates the participation of the parties and facilitates future decision-making. Agreeing on a shared goal was a way of creating a safe space—a common understanding of

what the meeting was about—rather than an objective that had to be achieved. It was important not to push too much too fast, because as the agonistic peace framework suggests, classic negotiations techniques that are designed to generate an agreement do not work in this context. Therefore, instead of looking for some kind of agreement, the main aim of the dialogue process was to shape a context within which recognition and tolerance could develop. The continuation of the dialogue process in itself was thus a thin (agonistic) recognition of the value of the process. Agonistic recognition is a prerequisite for a community's ability to transform potentially violent antagonism into agonism. In the context of the intra-Orthodox dialogue, the process helped to ensure that the two parties did not engage in using violence against each other, and helped to create a mutual safe zone. Dialogue could continue to build mutual understanding and recognition, where specific issues or disputes could potentially be resolved in future, without necessarily somehow resolving the underlying causes of the antagonism (Lehti 2025; Lehti & Romashov 2022).

This case shows how peacebuilders face a number of challenges when attempting to work for social cohesion amidst an ongoing interstate war. Firstly, the war (hot and hybrid) is continuously exacerbating and stoking the very same tensions that the peacebuilders are trying to address. The society is still dealing with some antagonistic narratives taken from the Soviet era of structured violence practices, as well as complicated history and mixed identity. This creates a stop-and-start dynamic where progress achieved can face frequent pushbacks and reversals. There is also a war-time culture of rallying around the government and the war effort, and ways in which peacebuilding efforts may put a spotlight on areas of tension in the society is not always welcomed.

The Ukrainian dialogue practitioners found the adaptive peacebuilding framework useful to gain insight into how the dialogues emerged and adapted, as well as to understand the role of the mediators or facilitators in the process. The adaptive peacebuilding approach helped to inform the design of the dialogue process. Firstly, the focus on the local context, which includes historical and cultural aspects and issues of identity, was useful to ensure that the dialogues reflected the issues that were important for the local stakeholders. Secondly, the focus on bottom-up grassroots level agency and relevance ensured that the parties were closely involved in shaping both process and content. Third, the focus on a participatory process helped the facilitators to understand the importance of giving the space to the participating parties themselves to determine how, with whom, when, and under what conditions the dialogue process can take place. Lastly, the principle of limiting the role of the mediators to process facilitation helped the dialogue practitioners to act only as mediators and organizers who monitored the process itself and its safety.

The Ukrainian dialogue practitioners had to continuously adapt their approach to the conditions and reality of not only a full-scale war, which imposes its own risks and unpredictable turns of events, but also to a rapidly changing context in the social and political spheres, where a narrow religious issue has acquired national importance. In this context it was useful to the dialogue practitioners to learn from the adaptive peacebuilding approach that the aim is not to find a final solution, because there can be no one lasting solution, but that in order to sustain peace, ongoing adaptation is necessary and normal. This helped the practitioners to understand why the adaptation process had to be iterative. Peace is never fully attained, it can at best be sustained or maintained through iterative cycles of learning and adaptation, and this is how the facilitators of the dialogue process understood internal peacebuilding within Ukraine.

Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

In this article we have focused on an aspect of Russia's war on Ukraine that has not received a lot of attention, namely, the domestic peacebuilding work going on inside Ukraine. We learned that Ukraine has a vibrant peacebuilding community that has developed its own practices and approaches to peacebuilding, mediation, and dialogue, especially since the start of the war in 2014. One unique aspect is that the peacebuilding work is being undertaken during an ongoing interstate war, and this generates the need to be highly adaptive and sensitive to the unfolding situation. It also means that peace and dialogue needs to be understood as aimed at sustaining internal cohesion and resilience, rather than as arriving at some form of agreement to end a conflict among warring parties. Whilst this form of internal peacebuilding enhances everyday peace, it also addresses phenomena and processes that have nation-wide importance. Thus, it cannot be described only as local peacebuilding but rather as agonistic peacebuilding because this is a more accurate description that captures the subtle practices of combining everyday peace with wider nation-wide significance (Allen 2022).

The focus of peacebuilding and peace mediation in Ukraine has been on sustaining and strengthening internal social cohesion, which is a critical element that any state and society needs to maintain the resolve necessary to defend itself against an aggressor. This becomes even more important when it is understood that in addition to the military campaign there is a hybrid war underway over the identity of Ukraine as a state and a nation that is aimed at disrupting and undermining social cohesion and to generate distrust and

antagonism among different identity groups within Ukraine. How to win the war with Russia without losing the peace in Ukraine thus becomes a critically important question for Ukraine's future, and one that Ukraine's peacebuilders are making an important contribution to answering.

The Ukrainian case shows how radical antagonism, or radical disagreement, resulting in interstate war also challenges the internal societal dynamics, cohesion, and trust of a society at war. It is also an example of how domestic peacebuilding practices can dilute the destructive effects of radical antagonism and contribute to preserving agonistic peace within Ukraine despite the war. Furthermore, agonistic practices of peace are then enhancing the anxiety-management that is essential for societal capability to cope with uncertainties and discord within Ukrainian society. It is assumed, but so far not empirically verified, that this kind of capacity will have crucial significance for post-war Ukraine to maintain trust and sustain internal peace. As the world has not experienced an interstate war at a scale similar to the Russian war on Ukraine since WWII, this case seems to be unique. However, the findings of this paper may have relevance for developing peacebuilding and peace mediation practices and understanding the role of informal agency in other cases of interstate war, both historically and in the future.

Our findings lead us to recommend that it is important for the government of Ukraine and its international partners to recognize that one of the preconditions for sustaining the war effort is building and sustaining social cohesion and societal stability within Ukraine. It is thus important to partner with and support Ukraine's peacebuilding community, both when it comes to supporting ongoing efforts and to steer new reconstruction efforts in ways that contribute to enhancing social cohesion.

It is important to emphasize that the Ukrainian peacebuilding community is endemic, and that its practice is based on Ukrainian knowledge and expertise even if well connected to the international peacebuilding community. It is this community who should define what kind of external support they need, not the international donor community. In addition to the need to delicately manage internal fault lines among some communities and institutions, we also find that there is a significant risk that the international effort to help reconstruct Ukraine can exacerbate existing tensions, and therefore we recommend that those responsible for the international effort to support Ukraine need to collaborate closely with national and local peacebuilders in Ukraine to ensure that the programs they undertake are conflict-sensitive, do no harm, and take active steps to monitor for and respond to unintended consequences. At the same time, the international effort can do more than physically reconstruct the country. It can also contribute to sustaining and strengthening social cohe-

sion if the programming is designed and implemented in ways that promote inclusion and societal trust.

In this context, adaptive peacebuilding may not only be useful for Ukrainian peacebuilders, but it can also guide the international development agencies and multilateral organizations that want to support Ukraine's reconstruction. As pointed out earlier, whilst these efforts can potentially be peace-positive and contribute to enhancing and sustaining social cohesion if they are implemented in ways that build trust across identity groups and communities, they can also potentially cause harm and undermine social cohesion if they are perceived to favor one community or interest group over others. Adaptive peacebuilding can help to ensure that the planning is context-specific and participatory in ways that involve all stakeholders in the design, implementation, and monitoring of the programs.

This paper shows that winning the peace in Ukraine is not limited to track-one diplomacy and international negotiations, but that internal peacebuilding and dialogues are also essential for winning the peace, and importantly for sustaining it. There is a risk that a society may be able to win a war but then lose the peace if it is not also able to sustain social cohesion during the war and in the post-war period. Sustaining social cohesion and overcoming drivers of polarization exacerbated by war are factors that could be even harder to achieve over the medium to long-term than making peace between two or more sides engaged in violent conflict in the short to medium-term. From an agonistic peace and adaptive peacebuilding perspective, it is essential that a society continuously invest in internal peacebuilding, even whilst it may be defending itself against a war of aggression, so that it is able to maintain internal social cohesion, as it is a source of resilience that is essential for coping with and sustaining a defense during an interstate war, as well as for sustaining societal cohesion in the post-war period.

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