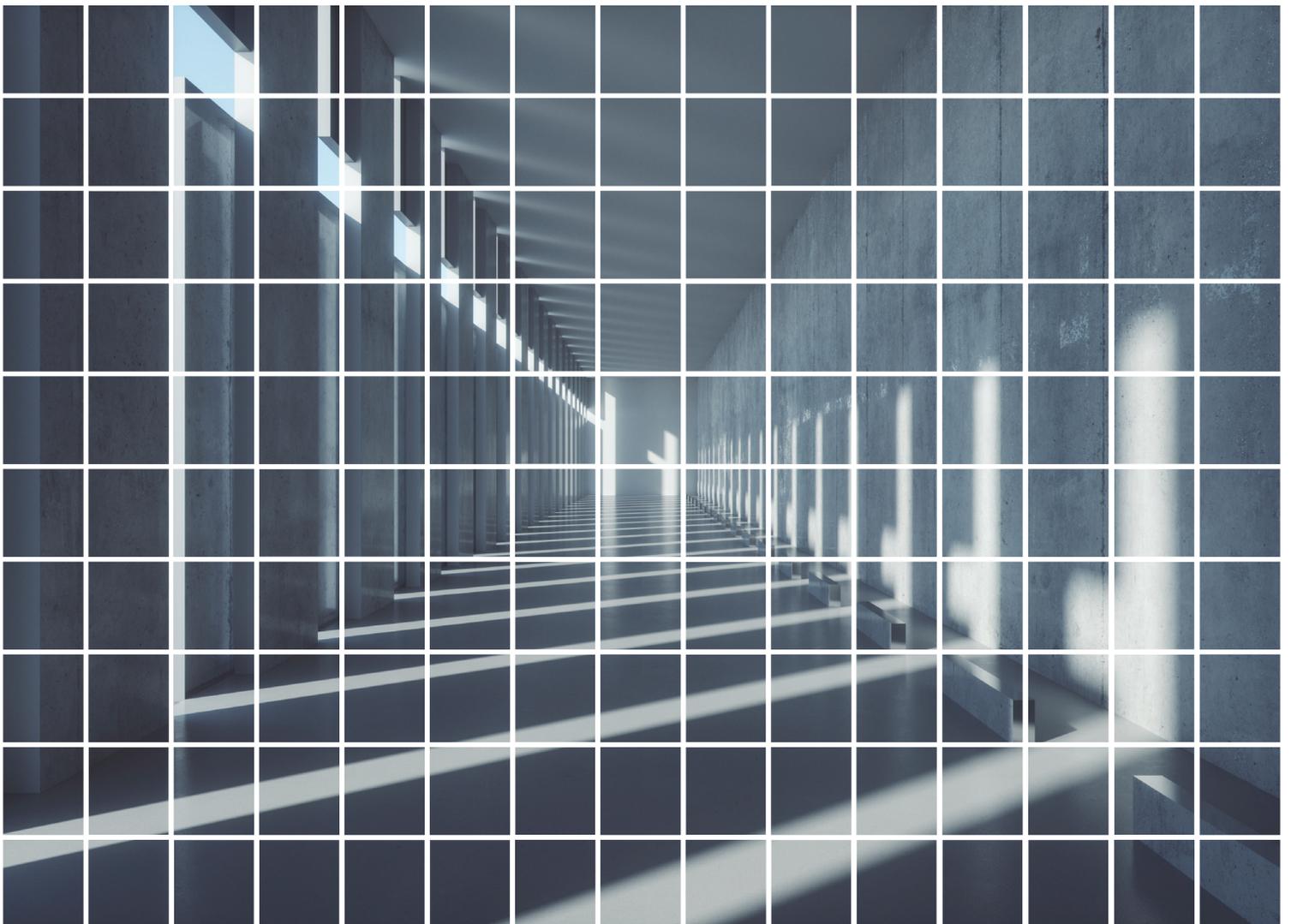


# Cross-Regional Dialogues: Launching an Informal Platform of Local Peacebuilders



# OSCE Network

OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions

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# Project History and Acknowledgements

The idea of cross-regional corridors of dialogue evolved from the work of the research group “Frozen and Unfrozen Conflicts” at the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS) in Regensburg, headed by Tanja Tamminen. Tamminen initiated the cooperation with the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions and, together with her colleagues Sebastian Relitz and Konstanze Jüngling, prepared the first policy paper, titled “New Corridors of Dialogue: Strengthening Durable Formats for Engagement across the Protracted Conflict Zones.” This paper was discussed at a Network workshop in Vienna in the summer of 2016. Since 2016, the concept has been applied at several dialogue workshops by the IOS and the INGO “Corridors – Dialogue through Cooperation” and has led to cooperation between participants from the region.

Starting in 2017, together with colleagues from the IOS, Marko Lehti from the Tampere Peace Research Institute (TAPRI) at Tampere University pursued the idea of holding a follow-up research project. The OSCE Network project originally called “Cross-Regional Corridors of Dialogue: Developing a Complementing Track for Transforming Long-standing Conflicts” was launched in the spring of 2018 to develop, extend, and test the original idea of establishing cross-regional corridors of dialogue. The present report presents the results of this project. The project was initially conducted jointly by TAPRI and the IOS under the direction of Marko Lehti. Cindy Wittke was the responsible person at the IOS. In late 2018, Sebastian Relitz founded the non-profit organization “Corridors – Dialogue through Cooperation,” which subsequently replaced the IOS as TAPRI’s project partner.

The fundraising for the project was executed by the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions. In this regard, we are particularly grateful for the support and advice of Frank Evers and Wolfgang Zellner from the Centre for OSCE Research (CORE), the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH) at the University of Hamburg. The logistical and administrative support provided by Naida Mehmedbegović Dreilich (IFSH) has likewise been invaluable. We are also indebted to Rasmus Bellmer (TAPRI), who worked as a project assistant at the first two workshops, and to the Tampere Peace Research Institute and Faculty of Social Sciences at Tampere University for their crucial support.

All projects require sponsors, and we are grateful for the financial support provided by the German Federal Foreign Office and the Austrian Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs. Furthermore, we are thankful to the Permanent Delegation of Finland to the OSCE, the Embassy of Finland in Austria, and the Academy of the Diocese Rottenburg-Stuttgart for hosting and supporting our workshops.

Above all, we are deeply grateful to our workshop participants and interview partners during our fieldwork. Without their openness and commitment to actively participating and sharing their perspectives, this project would not have been possible. This report builds largely on their knowledge, experience, and ideas. We have enjoyed our exchanges and have learned a great deal throughout the project. Many thanks to all of you.

## Executive Summary

A major challenge to supporting the transformation of the protracted conflicts in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria is presented by the fact that the conflict settings have been solidified as a new normality, and the polarized division between neighbors and within societies has been institutionalized. Calling these conflicts “frozen” is not only misleading but also politically counterproductive. At the same time, formal peace processes at the Track-One level often remain stalled. There is therefore a need to rethink how mediation and dialogue formats might better address intractable conflict settings and support conflict transformation.

Recent peacebuilding literature and practice strongly advocate bottom-up peacebuilding in line with the principles of inclusivity and local ownership. Nevertheless, such dialogue processes face several structural and political obstacles in protracted conflicts, which limit their peacebuilding potential. Consequently, it is crucial to develop new approaches to civil society dialogue that address these challenges and support and complement ongoing peace processes.

In this report, we address these challenges by presenting the concept of “cross-regional corridors of dialogue” and by calling for the establishment of informal platforms of local peacebuilders. These initiatives are intended to bypass polarized bilateral settings, enable the participation of local and international actors, and support local ownership of agenda setting. They are meant to help peacebuilders establish contact with each other across dividing lines, to enable knowledge exchange, and to develop joint activities. Although there is broad consensus

that all peace processes must be inclusive and locally managed, increasing the inclusiveness of civil society dialogues in the context of protracted conflict comes with significant challenges. This report identifies the main structural and political barriers to Track-Two dialogue and the ways in which they are supported by international organizations:

- limited inclusion of civil society actors in established negotiation formats;
- the “usual suspects” challenge and the need to diversify dialogue processes;
- the issue of the status of politico-territorial entities and the politicization of dialogue;
- limited spill-over and spreading perception changes;
- lack of local ownership of agenda setting; and
- limited space for dialogue and dialogue fatigue.

To address these challenges, this study develops the concept of cross-regional dialogue and examines the idea of an **informal platform of local peacebuilders from various areas affected by protracted conflict**.

This platform operates as a “corridor,” bringing together a diverse group of local peacebuilders and presenting opportunities for the establishment of additional, interconnected space for dialogue and cooperation across divides. Cross-regional corridors of dialogue can provide a conflict-neutral umbrella for these connections, a safe space for dialogue, and a dialogic arena with overlapping frictions, all of which help to transform the “us vs. them” setting. Focusing on cross-cutting issues instead of

overarching, conflict-specific problems allows for a change of perspective and facilitates learning from different experiences. Based on knowledge exchange among civil society actors from various regions and international actors, cross-regional dialogues support multi-level processes that focus on problem-finding dialogue and practical cooperation. This framework facilitates flexible, inclusive, and dynamic dialogue processes insofar as it:

- opens up space for dialogue when opportunities for bilateral dialogue are limited and indeed shrinking;
- reduces the politicization of dialogue, as it avoids mirroring official negotiations;
- introduces new forms of (and agendas for) peace dialogue; and
- enables informal knowledge exchange among local and international peacebuilders.

During our project, the potential of cross-regional dialogues to promote peaceful conflict transformation was discussed and tested with local peacebuilders and experts from international organizations (IOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). In this project, local peacebuilders act in a private capacity and not on the basis of their institutional affiliations. We conclude that cross-regional dialogues may constitute a new trust-building instrument that increases both societal trust in peace processes (particularly dialogue) and social inclusion. In general, the cross-regional formats enable dialogues that would not otherwise be possible, offering dialogic platforms for local and international peacebuilders and, in the best scenario, initiating societal dynamics for change within the relevant societies and across dividing lines.

With the aim of realizing the potential of cross-regional dialogue, and together with local peacebuilders, we have developed concrete ideas and recommendations.

*First, our key tested recommendation is the launching of an informal cross-regional dialogue platform for peacebuilders from areas affected by protracted conflict.* This platform would be used to facilitate a regular informal meeting that connects and supports local and international peacebuilders. The inclusive platform would enable the sharing of experiences, knowledge of recent developments, mutual learning, and brainstorming on how to deal with protracted conflicts and how to initiate cooperation across divides. Furthermore, it would create new links between local civil society stakeholders and international actors working in the field of conflict resolution.

Building on the dialogue platform, this report develops two concrete recommendations for further supportive measures to strengthen the potential of cross-regional dialogue.

*Second, the project participants recommended the establishment of joint or parallel research and advocacy projects on cross-cutting issues identified within the dialogue platform.* This can strengthen practical cooperation across the relevant divides, further elaborate new ideas, and produce tangible results in the form of knowledge transfer, outreach, and advocacy work through joint publications.

*Third, we recommend the establishment of a comprehensive education and capacity-building project for youth and future peacebuilders.* Skilled young peacebuilders are needed to generate new

positive dynamics within protracted conflicts, and it is crucial to increase their representation in dialogue processes. A joint capacity-building and peace education program for students and young professionals from the regions affected by protracted conflicts would train and connect new agents of change. These interconnected ideas have great potential for supporting the work of local peacebuilders, their host communities, and international peacebuilders, and in the long term they can generate positive dynamics in stalled peace processes. Together, they constitute the outlines of cross-regional “corridors” and establish interconnected, multilevel spaces for dialogue.



# Introduction to Cross-Regional Dialogues

In both internationally and locally organized peace dialogues, the common framework is a conflict-specific and often bilateral setting in which participants of two opposing sides come together under international facilitation. These (often confidential) meetings are important, and there is no apparent alternative to bilateral settings when polarization is institutionalized and affects entire societies. Nonetheless, inclusivity and local ownership must be taken seriously, and bottom-up processes need to be supported.

Our concept of cross-regional corridors of dialogue provides a viable way to give a voice to populations—especially in so-called de facto states—who are often not heard at the international level insofar as their views are hijacked by more powerful actors (e.g. the parent state) or ignored altogether. Following the intersectionality principle, they can also foster further representativity by involving diverse sections of the population (e.g. youth, women, religious minorities, IDPs, etc.).

Cross-regional dialogue between (local) peacebuilders who meet in a personal capacity may thus constitute a new trust-building instrument for increasing both societal trust in peace processes, particularly dialogue, and social inclusion.

Cross-regional dialogue among peacebuilders can create a corridor connecting different local and international actors and building new, interconnected space for dialogue. The cross-regional approach implies that individuals from various conflict-affected areas can participate in dialogue that does not position one party to the conflict in opposition to another (or to several others).

In our example, even though peace dialogue involving Georgian, South Ossetian, and Abkhaz participants can be viewed as representing several conflict-affected areas, the Georgian participants can be regarded as representing one side of the conflict in opposition to both the South Ossetian and the Abkhaz participants. We therefore do not consider such a format to be cross-regional. At the same time, the involvement of Abkhaz, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Ossetian participants, despite their all being from the South Caucasus, creates a cross-regional dialogue format. Our project also involved Moldovan and Transdniestrian peacebuilders, which further strengthened the cross-regional dimension of the dialogue.

Bringing together peacebuilders from different conflict-affected societies and different protracted conflicts enables the overcoming and transformation of politicized roles and polarized settings for several reasons:

- cross-regional dialogues among peacebuilders do not mirror official negotiation frameworks;
- cross-regional dialogues focus on cross-cutting issues and topics rather than overarching conflict-specific problems and barriers;
- cross-regional dialogues enable learning from different experiences and therefore oppose self-centered interpretations;
- ultimately, they create a dialogical space with different and overlapping frictions, which helps to transform the “us vs. them” setting.

Cross-regional dialogues build primarily on the idea of multi-actor, multi-level processes that

focus on problem-finding dialogue and practical cooperation. The cross-regional framework allows for the recognition of commonalities between conflicts and the establishment of dialogue and cooperation in areas of shared importance in a way that allows participants to address the specific circumstances of each protracted conflict. It facilitates the exchange

of best practices, experiences, and knowledge among different conflict-affected regions and with international actors. Supplementing bilateral with multilateral processes would enable new perspectives from which to envision the (shared) future that may, in the long run, be a crucial factor in generating confidence, trust, and conflict transformation.

## Project Design and Implementation

The essence of our two-year project was to create and test a pilot of the “Cross-Regional Corridor of Dialogue.” To understand its potential and restrictions and to enable the cultivation and application of the original concept, we first analyzed the realms of civil society dialogue to support peace processes. Our work began with an evaluation of past and ongoing dialogue processes by international peacebuilders, international scholars, and local peacebuilders from populations directly affected by protracted conflicts. We consulted and interviewed dozens of local and international stakeholders, bringing together local and international peacebuilders and scholars in three workshops. During the discussions, we invited these participants to deliberate from the perspective of their extensive experience with ideas related to peace dialogue. Throughout our project, we aimed to:

- present the voices of civil society actors from populations directly affected by conflicts and, based on their input, identify challenges posed by dialogue formats;
- indicate, together with local participants, the significance and concrete benefits of cross-regional dialogues, based on their experience in organizing dialogues in regional and cross-regional contexts; and
- explore possibilities for enhancing dialogues among different civil society actors.

Practically, we launched the project with the workshop “Experiences and Opportunities: The OSCE as Mediator and Facilitator of Civil Society Dialogues in Long-Standing Conflicts” in Vienna (November 2018). Its objectives were to scrutinize peace processes and the role of international third

parties from a broader perspective, to identify the needs and expectations of local societies, and to understand the possibilities, limitations, and potential of international peacebuilding. The workshop combined academic and practical knowledge as well as local and international perspectives by bringing together various scholars and experts, former and current OSCE officials working in the relevant field missions and OSCE projects, and members of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Center, as well as its Mediation Support Team.

In the second phase of the project, we concentrated on listening to local civil society actors, with an eye to learning from their experiences with international third parties and understanding their hopes for the future. For this purpose, team members travelled to the conflict-affected areas to meet and interview representatives of various local NGOs and other relevant individuals with experience of participating in peace dialogues. These discussions had a double objective: to build a broad understanding of local experiences and to select potential participants so as to develop the format of cross-regional dialogues in the experimental dialogic workshops to come.

The first experimental dialogue forum was organized in April 2019 in Stuttgart, and a follow-up dialogue was held in October 2019 in Vienna. These forums brought together local peacebuilders from the South Caucasus (including the disputed territories) and Moldova/Transnistria in order to develop ideas on how cross-regional dialogues can support the transformation of intractable conflicts. Rather than dealing with a single conflict and its possible solution, these informal forums were purposefully designed

to create a cross-regional framework and to focus on generic topics such as practices, processes, and roles in peace dialogues.

Our participants did not officially represent organizations or political entities. They were handpicked and invited solely because of their expertise and willingness to participate in the dialogue forum. We regard them as “local peacebuilders” not because of their professional training or access to peace processes but because of their interest in engaging, envisioning, and developing new approaches to peace dialogues concerning their local societies. Rather than defining local peacebuilders in terms of their professional or institutional affiliations, we consider such definitions

to be primarily a matter of self-identification.

Our meetings also involved peace and conflict researchers, who acted as project organizers and introduced and discussed their academic perspectives. The organizing team acted as facilitators, while participants worked intensively in small groups with target-oriented questions. These workshops piloted an informal forum for dialogue between the participants on current developments in their respective regions and individual conflict contexts. The practical recommendations in this report therefore evolved in dialogic interaction between our research team and participating local peacebuilders.

## Addressing “Protracted Conflict Syndrome”

The disputes around Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transdniestria escalated three decades ago following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and international efforts to bring them to an end have continued since then. Despite various international peace interventions and partial and occasional progress in peace processes, it is evident that a solution is no closer than it was a decade or two ago. Moreover, the belief that no solution is on the horizon is widely and firmly held. Both sides continue to cherish the possibility of an absolute victory and are therefore largely unwilling to compromise in negotiations or to take drastic initiatives or measures to reach a solution. The conflicts concern fundamental issues of life and death—the survival of peoples, communities, and individuals—and thus they are attached to strong symbolic meaning, values, beliefs, and identities. The collective acceptance of the intractableness of the conflict is characteristic of what has been called *protracted conflict syndrome*.

Protracted conflicts exist at interconnected local, regional, and international levels. In the post-Soviet space, the recently renewed geopolitical “East–West” confrontation has introduced new dynamics, layers, and obstacles to the conflicts, rendering them even more protracted and complex. Their international dimension continuously shapes and redefines them. Nevertheless, we should not oversimplify the conflicts by marginalizing their regional and domestic levels. The traditional, “realpolitik” approach tends to undermine the importance and potential of local initiatives and the agency of civil society actors. We do not deny the prominence of the geopolitical framework, but we firmly believe that bottom-up civil society efforts are equally significant.

The past fifteen years have witnessed a shift in international peacebuilding towards the prioritization of bottom-up, micro peacebuilding in line with the principles of inclusivity and local ownership. It is widely agreed that civil society actors can and should play a vital role in enhancing peacebuilding processes. Their engagement is vital to increasing the processes’ inclusivity and legitimacy. By hearing local voices and involving grassroots actors, it is possible to enhance local agency. Giving voice to the silenced and the sidelined through civil society dialogue has proven to be a positive approach to peacebuilding insofar as it ensures that groups such as youth, women, and minorities are both heard and actively engaged.

Engaging with civil society actors in the case of protracted conflicts comes with major challenges, as these conflicts are entangled with complex, deep societal ties that have created a settled new normality. Moreover, various (often institutionalized) forms of mutually antagonistic identifications affect the everyday lives of hundreds of thousands of people, set up invisible mental borders, and narrow horizons for peace in societies and countries caught in protracted conflict. The dominance of polarized identities is characteristic of societies affected by protracted conflict and limits their ability to tolerate differences and multiple interpretations of the conflict at issue. Indeed, polarized societies have significant limitations when it comes to both pluralistic (democratic) politics and human security. Furthermore, from a security perspective, protracted conflict increases the risk of regional and international destabilization.

A major challenge to conflict resolution is the fact that the collective experience of conflict prevents

change and is linked to societal identification. Experiences of conflict and trauma are not traditionally negotiable. Protracted conflicts take on a chronic, intergenerational character through conflict socialization in the affected communities. There is therefore a need to reconsider the foundations of peace intervention and to establish new approaches to addressing protracted conflict syndrome and polarized narratives. In this context, corridors of local peacebuilder dialogue offer a more concrete means by which to bypass the politicization of civil society dialogues, facilitate transformation, and thus address protracted conflict syndrome.

Cross-regional dialogue between local peacebuilders can strengthen the inclusiveness of peace processes; furthermore, such initiatives provide for the maintenance and establishment of channels of communication when official talks are stalled and/or conflict escalates. They can produce fresh ideas, trigger new dynamics to support ongoing peace processes, and give conflict transformation in protracted conflicts a new impetus. Furthermore, cross-regional dialogues create a new kind of transnational dialogic platform that promotes both local ownership of agenda setting and the intersection of local and international knowledges.

# Obstacles to Civil Society Dialogue in Protracted Conflicts

Even if there is broad consensus that all peace processes need to be inclusive, enhancing the inclusiveness of civil society dialogues in contexts of protracted conflict comes with significant challenges. During the project, we were able to identify a number of obstacles characteristic of protracted conflicts, in our target areas in particular. These are pragmatic challenges that cross-regional dialogues aim to tackle, bypass, and resolve.

## *Limited space for dialogue*

Protracted conflicts in Moldova and the South Caucasus are characterized by limited space for dialogue and cooperation across divides. In many cases, public and political discourses on conflict transformation and reconciliation are severely constrained by perceived red lines.

- Influential political and societal spoilers often condemn civil society meetings with the opposing side as being against the national interest.
- Policies and tendencies of isolation and self-isolation limit the possibilities for direct person-to-person contact. Thus, physical space for bilateral dialogue across divides is limited, especially in the South Caucasus.
- Consequently, working relations across conflict divides and the information flow between the two sides are limited. Representatives of the younger generation are particularly affected by this lack of opportunity for encounter and exchange.

- For more than a quarter of a century, an entire generation on opposite sides of the conflict in Georgia/Abkhazia/South Ossetia, Armenia/Azerbaijan/Nagorno-Karabakh, and to a much lesser degree Moldova/Transnistria grew up without experiencing mutual exchange with “the other.” Thus, it is crucial to (re-)create and support spaces for mutual exchange, especially between representatives of younger generations.

## *Dialogue fatigue and lack of tangible results*

The above-discussed protracted conflicts have been the focus of international conflict management and peacebuilding attempts for more than 25 years, and the facilitation of dialogue has been an ever-present part of these efforts.

- Because of limited progress in conflict resolution, there is a strong sense of frustration with the lack of tangible results. In many cases, we can identify growing dialogue fatigue among civil society stakeholders and international organizations. Moreover, within societies affected by protracted conflicts, a sense of dialogue cynicism is evident, and this skepticism is particularly widespread in disputed territories.
- Thus, dialogue processes that do not produce tangible results for conflict-affected societies are increasingly viewed as suspicious within their constituencies and are exposed to increased social and political pressure.

### *The “usual suspects” and the need to diversify dialogue processes*

Although the space for dialogue in protracted conflicts is very limited, there are several ongoing initiatives that manage to keep dialogic processes running. Many of these initiatives have delivered valuable contributions over a long period; unfortunately, however, many involve the very same stakeholders, experts, and civil society representatives. Even though continuity and stable relations between participants in dialogue formats are crucial, the issue of the “usual suspects” is becoming problematic: the same people meet again and again in different frameworks, and very few new individuals are engaged. These “usual suspects” with whom international actors frequently work have already adopted international peacemaking vocabulary and norms. There are four main reasons for this.

*First*, most international donors and stakeholders primarily trust well-established domestic civil society actors to implement their projects successfully and take a cautious approach to new actors. *Second*, working with key civil society representatives ensures a certain degree of acceptance of their activities within the host society and political system, as such actors have a strong position within their communities and are perceived as proven multipliers. *Third*, many civil society representatives are unwilling to engage in dialogue with “the other.” After more than 25 years of protracted conflict and separation, the new generation lacks interest in and knowledge of conflict transformation. And *fourth*, international stakeholders engage with like-minded actors but tend to keep at a distance those organizations that cherish more nationalistic and patriotic narratives, thereby “preaching to the converted.”

Thus, dialogue processes face the challenge of considering the internal diversity of concerned civil societies. Not only do civil society groups coalesce and mobilize around specific causes and issues, but they also represent different social, cultural, religious, economic, and political groups. There is also a distinction between grassroots organizations that work at the local level and think tank–like NGOs that mostly operate in capital cities and/or at the international level. Both can potentially play an important role in dialogue activities and peace processes, but it is usually only the latter that are invited to participate in national and international activities. Moreover, international organizations tend to sideline those NGOs that work in rural areas and in languages other than English. Furthermore, those actors that are not regarded as representing civil society in a modern liberal understanding, such as highly influential religious actors, are rarely included in dialogue processes. This trend strengthens the position of the “usual suspects.” Expanding the circle of engaged participants and including a wide range of different groups on both sides of the divide is crucial to diversifying dialogue processes.

### *The status problem*

A fundamental challenge for conflict resolution activities in Moldova and the South Caucasus is the disputed status of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. Even though these entities have developed vital features and structures of statehood for more than 25 years, they are not recognized by most of the international community. The matter of disputed status also has serious consequences for informal dialogue processes.

*First*, political and social tensions restrict opportunities for dialogue activities in the regions

themselves, especially within the South Caucasus. At present, for example, it is difficult for Georgians to travel to Abkhazia and South Ossetia (and vice versa). The same applies to contact between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. It is therefore necessary to use “neutral” locations outside the relevant conflict settings, which often increases the costs and makes third-party facilitation necessary. However, even if the situation varies greatly among the cases, the documents issued in these entities are not recognized by most states, which restricts opportunities for outside travel and impedes participation in international dialogue. Such restrictions not only increase the workload for organizing dialogue meetings abroad but also evoke negative experiences with visa procurement and may discourage people from participating.

*Second*, the status problem is not only a practical obstacle to dialogue but also the core of the conflict itself, and all solutions need to address this issue. To achieve progress in peace processes, *we need to change the logic* and build trust, promoting inclusivity without addressing the status question.

*Third*, the status issue limits the scope of action on the part of international organizations and states insofar as working in the disputed territories can require the consent of the “metropolitan” states. Thus, international funding is often limited, indirect, or subject to specific conditions, which can create new cleavages and asymmetric relationships. A common approach to the conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, involves supporting Yerevan-based organizations that have partners in Nagorno-Karabakh because direct engagement with organizations based in Nagorno-Karabakh is strongly opposed by the Azerbaijani authorities. Relations between NGOs in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are often asymmetrical and challenging,

however. Local NGOs suspect that Yerevan-based NGOs keep most of the international funding for themselves and give mere “crumbs” to their Nagorno-Karabakh partners. Furthermore, civil society activists in Nagorno-Karabakh feel that their opinions are not listened to and that they are treated as mere executors of pragmatic humanitarian work rather than partners capable of influencing agenda setting. Directly engaging with civil societies from disputed territories (as well as refugee and IDP communities) and strengthening their agency poses a major challenge that the international donor community must tackle. This long-term problem generates vulnerabilities among and pressure on local peacebuilders in the region.

### *The exclusion of civil society actors from traditional formats*

Among the experts interviewed for this report, there is a widespread perception that international peacebuilders and mediators fear the interference of civil society actors in peace processes because they are deeply divided and in no way less opinionated than their political leaders. Civil society actors are often viewed not as offering solutions but as representing a problem. Conversely, civil society representatives often criticize the limited inclusiveness of official processes, the rare opportunities for direct exchange with international organizations, and the lack of support for their ideas on how to organize dialogues.

A related challenge pertains to the representativity of civil society organizations. Government-organized non-governmental organizations (or GONGOs) that have been created by, or are very close to, their respective governments can be found in many regions. Often invited to participate in dialogue

activities as the “token” civil society member, they are rarely (or never) active in the public sphere. Treating GONGOs as if they were “real” civil society organizations, independent of political power, can have negative consequences for dialogue by blocking access to the actual civil society sector.

### *Difficulty reinforcing perception change*

Within public and official settings, all dialogues are almost automatically politicized through pre-given antagonized roles. International NGO actors have been interested in addressing antagonized relationships by launching confidential, informal platforms of dialogue with a limited number of participants to change the polarized perceptions held by younger members of society. These projects have often concentrated on engaging certain active members of society from all sides in dialogue. At the end of these intensive dialogues, the participants usually establish somewhat friendly relationships, but a consequent challenge for such initiatives is how to create a snowball effect, such that this change in perspective can extend to those who have not participated in face-to-face dialogue arrangements.

This problem is a concern for certain organizers of such projects, who typically emphasize the role of younger participants in the dialogue insofar as they are viewed as potential future leaders and change makers. Still, the question of how these few educated, tolerant young people can spread their influence and contribute to the broader transformation of narratives remains open and untested. The same puzzling question applies to work with other potential multipliers, such as politicians, journalists, and women.

In any case, it seems that a “change of narrative” is easier to achieve in face-to-face dialogue, but

organizing such platforms is possible only for select, small groups. Because of structural limitations and political realities, broader changes to dominant narratives can be achieved through small, gradual steps.

In this sense, cross-regional dialogue offers an instrument for enhancing transnational narratives in particular, and thus for transforming polarized narratives and recognizing the emotional significance of national identity. National, ethnic, and religious identities are not constant but multiple and contingent; in the context of protracted conflict, however, antagonistic forms of identification prevail and sustain conformity. In this context, peace dialogues can help to support the fluidity of identities, but the promotion of narrative change requires securing a feeling of national self-esteem. According to our study, cross-regional dialogues offer a potentially appropriate configuration for supporting such transformation.

### *Lack of local ownership*

Most local NGOs primarily depend on outside funding, which makes them vulnerable to external and internal pressure and limits their ownership over their own activities. Aid dependency and the hidden agendas of external funding agencies bring new, often negative, dynamics to conflict areas. International organizations and donors have their own objectives and goals, and these do not always reflect the needs of local communities and civil societies. To increase the chances of success, international engagement should become more needs driven, for example by identifying fields of mutual interest across divides and developing contextualized approaches to tackling these issues. Local communities therefore require greater ownership over dialogue processes. This extends to agenda setting, which should be

accomplished by including conflict-affected societies, where knowledge of local interests and needs is essentially situated.

Local NGOs that focus on peace dialogues believe strongly that they know which measures are needed and feasible but that they lack the financial capacities to execute their initiatives. On the one hand, they are tired of the international control over dialogue processes; on the other hand, however, they are conscious that they need international support to realize their ideas. Access to international support remains a specific challenge for civil society actors in regions such as Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria. Civil society

actors from these areas are often marginalized, and international funding is often limited or completely unavailable. Most funds are channeled through their “parent” states and/or come from partner and diaspora organizations. There are a few exceptions, such as the EU-UNDP Civil Society Support Program (CSSP) in 2017, which supported around 25 projects in Abkhazia. Rather than being aimed primarily at building the confidence of Georgian stakeholders and beneficiaries, these projects aimed to strengthen and diversify Abkhaz civil society and to support initiatives related to locally identified needs in the social, cultural, and economic spheres. Such direct funding lines for civil society in disputed regions have the potential to increase local ownership.



## Lessons Learned: The Potential and Limitations of Cross-Regional Dialogue

The specific challenges associated with dialogue initiatives in protracted conflicts call for alternative approaches to (and conceptions of) dialogue that can supplement and support ongoing peace processes. Such approaches must include mechanisms to involve and empower various actors in bypassing structural and political obstacles to dialogue. We believe that our concept of cross-regional dialogues encompasses such approaches. In this section, we *first* examine how cross-regional formats can address some of the major challenges to dialogue in protracted conflicts. *Second*, we discuss possible regional frameworks. *Third*, we discuss both the potential and the limitations and risks of initiating cross-regional dialogues.

### ***Opening new space for dialogue when opportunities for bilateral dialogue are limited***

Cross-regional dialogues enable participation and connections that would otherwise be impossible or highly problematic. As we have seen, the scope for action on the part of local peacebuilders varies among conflict settings and entities, but active cooperation across heavily securitized boundaries and mutually polarized societies is significantly limited.

The activities of local peacebuilders are often controlled, closely observed, and used for political ends by the parties involved, while bilateral civil society meetings are most vulnerable to political and social pressure. To enable transnational civil society dialogue, it is necessary to launch platforms that are more resilient and that do not generate immediate suspicion.

Our cross-regional dialogues among peacebuilders offer a possible way to overcome these serious limitations. In our project, peacebuilders were given the opportunity to enter into multilateral exchange and to engage in bilateral exchange with “the other.” In these cross-regional dialogues, our participants did not represent official sides or institutions (even though they were experienced local peacebuilders), and thus they did not feel obliged to express official political positions or arrangements that would easily end up replicating confrontations. Furthermore, because cross-regional dialogue meetings did not address specific conflict matters, they helped local peacebuilders to enter into direct and informal exchanges with each other without being exposed to accusations of collaboration with “the rival group.”

All in all, our cross-regional framework design served as a conflict-neutral umbrella and safe space for dialogue. In this way, it can also open new space for bilateral dialogue within (and protected by) a multilateral setting in cases where such spaces are otherwise limited.

### ***Reducing the politicization of dialogue and avoiding the mirroring of official negotiations***

Cross-regional corridors of dialogue do not mirror official negotiation frameworks, and this reduces the risk of their being politicized. Participants enter into a cross-regional exchange with their peers which, in contrast to bilateral dialogue forums, does not run along established lines of conflict. Moreover, cross-regional contexts have depoliticizing effects as they enable participants to step out of the highly

securitized, polarized roles characteristic of bi-party settings. In bilateral settings, antagonistic roles offer participants secure positions to which they can easily retreat and which constitute major obstacles to confidence building. In cross-regional settings, by contrast, participants cannot assume antagonized roles so easily. Moreover, cross-regional multi-actor dialogues require participants to actively seek more negotiable roles and positions. Cross-regional platforms can therefore lead to the depoliticization of dialogue processes and offer favorable settings for confidence building. They also enable participants to learn from others' experiences and therefore counter self-centered discourses. This is further bolstered by their primary focus on cross-cutting issues such as education, environment, human rights, and women's empowerment.

Organizers of cross-regional platforms must consider how to avoid politicization. Participation must be designed carefully to avoid misinterpretation of the political importance of the forums. One option is to broaden participation by including international academics alongside local and international peace practitioners, thus lending a partially academic character to the meetings. Academic and scientific extension can be important as it gives more flexibility to both local and international participants. According to the participants in our workshops, academic contexts are less likely to be treated with suspicion in the eyes of their home countries' authorities. As many local peacebuilders have a background in higher education and/or academic research, this participation can easily be justified.

Conversely, international organizations like the OSCE remain cautious when working with non- or partly recognized entities, as their engagement should be immune to misinterpretation. Their formal involvement in bilateral civil society dialogues can be

misinterpreted as interventions in peace processes outside their mandates. Cross-regional settings are less sensitive, however, and open up new possibilities for action on the part of international organizations because they avoid such misinterpretation by design.

### *Avoiding dialogue fatigue and facilitating tangible results*

To address dialogue fatigue, it is important for dialogue processes to generate tangible results for those living in conflict-affected regions. This also strengthens the position of local peacebuilders. Thus, from a pragmatic perspective, dialogue participants generally favor clear goal setting and concrete results as incentives to participate in dialogue processes. Paradoxically, when *problem-solving* dialogue involving clear goal setting is impossible (which is typically the case with small cross-regional formats), *problem-finding* dialogues can generate much-needed impetus and enable change in the long run. Although cross-regional frameworks can facilitate both *problem-solving* and *problem-finding* dialogue, they provide greater support to the latter.

Cross-regional dialogue can help civil society stakeholders to engage in interest-driven cooperation across divides, potentially leading to concrete results. Nevertheless, cooperation across divides requires strong commitment and personal effort from all participants, and it must therefore generate added value for all involved parties. Tangible results can take a variety of forms, ranging from joint publications and projects, to opportunities to share experience and knowledge, to feelings of belonging and friendship among participants. Organizing dialogues among groups with diverse professional and personal backgrounds can also address dialogue fatigue. Including academics, businesspeople, and artists, for example, can introduce alternative

perspectives on the prospect of peace, contest routinized practices of contemporary peacebuilding, and facilitate the generation of new ideas.

In addition to producing tangible results, it is important for cross-regional dialogues to engage local peacebuilders by offering new types of stimuli, supporting their capacity for agenda setting, and thus empowering their agency and self-esteem. To overcome growing fatigue and cynicism, the agenda should be based on local needs and the peacebuilders' own suggestions rather than the objectives of international stakeholders. The arrangement and design of such dialogues should be placed in the hands of local participants. From their perspective, the presence of international organizations is nevertheless regarded as a valuable form of support and as recognition of their activities. Sharing local knowledge and ideas with international actors is regarded as empowering and strengthening the agency and self-esteem of local participants, which further enables independent thinking and action.

### *Enabling knowledge exchange between local and international peacebuilders*

Cross-regional platforms also invite the participation of representatives of international organizations, preferably in their private capacity. As less politicized and informal settings, they create additional spaces for interaction between formalized international structures and local peacebuilders (the importance of this was highlighted by an OSCE representative during our cross-regional dialogue forum in Stuttgart). Furthermore, this arrangement provides an opportunity for local peacebuilders to share their knowledge and ideas with international actors. Such meetings are particularly valuable insofar as they allow international peace actors to receive first-hand information from a broad spectrum of

local actors. For formal actors, this may compensate for the informational shortcomings of formal negotiation settings, facilitating engagement with local knowledge of regional developments. Our project participants emphasized the building of informal bridges (both horizontally and vertically) as a promising tool for enhancing societal acceptance of peace processes.

### *The geographic scope and labeling of cross-regional dialogues*

Another important aspect of the design of cross-regional dialogues is regional scope. Although there are currently various protracted, intractable conflicts across the globe, it is obvious that neighboring areas constitute a meaningful context for cross-regional dialogues. Creating an atmosphere of trust and informal relationships is easier when participants have had similar experiences and can communicate them to each other. This does not mean that sharing experiences with people from regions beyond the post-Soviet space is not beneficial, but it can be more challenging.

The geographic labels under which cross-regional platforms are organized are meaningful and important signifiers. The post-Soviet label, still widely used by international observers, highlights the legacy of the Soviet Union as a common denominator; it often has negative connotations for those involved, however, and obscures the ways in which the relevant societies have developed since Soviet times.

Common alternative labels used for cross-regional dialogues, networks, and organizations in the region include “the Black Sea,” “Caucasus,” “South Caucasus,” and “Eastern Partnership countries.” The latter refers to the European Union’s policies, but all others hint at transnational connections and a shared past.

Ultimately, determining the appropriate geographic label depends on the regional layout of the dialogue process, which is itself determined by target goals and envisioned practical outcomes. Thus, the labels used in cross-regional dialogues and their regional scope depend on their content. Accordingly, the relevant topics are determined to a large extent by the selection of the participants. Since it is important for participants to have ownership of topic selection and agenda setting, it is up to them to agree on the dialogue's geographic scope and key labels.

### *Potentiality and pitfalls*

Our cross-regional dialogue format provides an additional tool for supporting and stimulating local peacebuilding that can complement international initiatives. Nevertheless, there are practical limitations and risks related to the implementation of our approach.

It is important to understand that cross-regional dialogues are effective instruments for exchanging techniques, information, and contacts; they are not stand-alone tools for resolving conflicts as such. Rather than offering quick solutions, they call for long-term engagement and in this sense are complementary to, and supportive of, bilateral dialogues and official peace processes.

Cross-regional dialogue provides a safe space for local peacebuilders and gives them opportunities to

meet discreetly with their counterparts on the “other side.” Nevertheless, it must be complemented by a transformative internal dialogue within each society to build support for peace processes and to promote local ownership. There is therefore a need to create positive spill-over effects for decision makers (who are difficult to influence) and the broader population (who often view peacebuilding as a “senseless activity”).

It is nonetheless worth keeping in mind that there is tension between the need to preserve some amount of secrecy regarding such dialogue processes and the need to garner support for peace in both spheres. Joint publications and tangible results can help to secure a certain level of advocacy, transparency, and support. At the same time, the security of the participants and the dialogue process should be ensured and prioritized over public outreach.

Finally, there is a need for consistency. To be efficient, cross-regional corridors of communication must be designed as continuing processes. The continuous support of international donors is therefore also necessary. Donors should be committed to the intended results, but they must equally have strategic patience. Dialogue processes do not always produce immediate results, but they nonetheless have value in themselves. In turn, lack of consistency can lead to frustration among local and international peacebuilders who have invested substantial time and effort.

## Recommendations

*We recommend the establishment of an informal, cross-regional dialogue platform for peacebuilders from areas affected by protracted conflicts.* These platforms would serve as regular informal meetings to connect and support local and international peacebuilders. The inclusive platform would allow participants to share their knowledge of recent developments, provide accounts of their experiences, and generate ideas for dealing with protracted conflicts and fostering cooperation across divides. Furthermore, it could create new links between local civil society stakeholders and international actors working on conflict transformation. This platform could also engage populations from disputed regions in the dialogue process.

The local peacebuilders involved in our project consider *analyzing, mapping the differences between conflicts, and being updated on recent developments* to be important exercises. This kind of *knowledge exchange* can support conflict prevention and trust building where the spillover effect is achieved. It can also help local and international peacebuilders to generate ideas, exchange experiences, meet with potential partners, and initiate new projects. The exchange aims to go beyond mere dialogue and knowledge transfer and to provide a platform for identifying cross-cutting issues in different spheres of society. These issues can be used as starting points for further joint activities in the time between dialogue meetings. Our project participants highlighted the importance of continued exchange when it comes to deepening the confidence-building effects of dialogue processes.

Within the informal dialogue forum, *peacebuilders take part in a private capacity and do not represent an organization or entity.* The participants can therefore freely express their opinions, and there is less risk of their feeling obliged to perform in polarized roles. Formal roles are easily associated with assigned roles and rhetoric, whereas a more personal engagement supports informality and confidence.

We would like to offer two further recommendations related to launching cross-regional dialogues in the South Caucasus and Moldova/Transdniestria that would likely benefit local peacebuilders, their host communities, and international formal and informal peacebuilders while generating positive dynamics for peace processes in these areas in the long run.

*We recommend providing support to joint research and advocacy projects on cross-cutting issues implemented by people from the areas affected by protracted conflicts.* As an element of cross-regional dialogue, such projects can be instrumental to strengthening cooperation across divides, gaining a deeper understanding of the identified problems, and elaborating new ideas for dealing with them. Insofar as many peacebuilders have an academic background and discursive spaces are wider in scholarly work, academic collaboration can provide an opening for effective exchanges. Such spaces can be used to develop and test thought-provoking ideas and to offer new perspectives on common challenges. By publishing these results, local knowledge can also be transferred to regional and international discourses. Further, such publications are tangible and visible

results of the dialogue process. They create a certain degree of transparency and outreach with regard to the dialogue process. In this way, these developed ideas and alternative perspectives and discourses can be fed into broader regional and international political and social discussions.

*We also recommend supporting comprehensive education and capacity-building projects for young people and future peacebuilders.* Skilled young peacebuilders can generate new positive dynamics within protracted conflicts, and it is crucial to increase their representation in dialogue processes. Throughout our project, participants highlighted the importance of strengthening local capacities in the field of peace education and beyond. This is especially important insofar as there are few educational opportunities in the field of peacebuilding in the project region. Consequently, local capacities are especially limited for young people, who are underrepresented in peace processes. A joint capacity-building and peace education program for students and young professionals from the project region could train and connect new agents of change. It would increase the representation of skilled young people in peace dialogues and reduce the overrepresentation of the “usual suspects.” Combining capacity building with cross-regional dialogue is a promising approach that would enable broad and inclusive knowledge exchange. Such an educational and capacity-building project could be jointly developed and implemented by local peacebuilders in our cross-regional dialogue platform and by international experts. It could start, for example, with the organization of summer schools and/or study trips to OSCE headquarters and institutions.

These three interconnected ideas have the potential to support the work of local peacebuilders, their host communities, and international peacebuilders and may generate positive dynamics within peace processes in the long run. Together, they constitute a cross-regional “corridor” with interconnected, multi-level dialogue spaces. Within this framework, local peacebuilders can open and close “doors” to new spaces for dialogue and cooperation based on their needs and current abilities. The framework enables the establishment of a dialogue process that can react flexibly to changing context conditions, which strengthens the resilience of peace processes. Furthermore, this cross-regional platform for dialogue can produce tangible results in terms of cooperation, making a significant contribution to the peaceful transformation of protracted conflicts. In their role as a neutral umbrella for such dialogue, international NGOs and academic institutions can facilitate the process in an impartial way.

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# APPENDIX:

## Workshops and Other Activities of the OSCE Network Project “Cross-Regional Corridors of Dialogue”

### 1. Workshops

22-23 November 2018, Vienna, Austria: Workshop  
**“Experiences and Opportunities: The OSCE as  
Mediator and Facilitator of Civil Society Dialogues  
in Long-Standing Conflicts”**

*Participants:* 29 participants including team members, scholars, participants from the OSCE, and representatives of several international NGOs.

*Objective:* The workshop explored the potential benefits of closer links between OSCE-facilitated Track-One mediation formats and complementary Track-Two dialogues. The objective was to find new perspectives on how to support OSCE efforts in addressing longstanding conflict settings through confidence-building measures.

15-18 April 2019, Stuttgart, Germany: Experimental dialogue forum **“Cross-Regional and Inter-Sectional Dialogues: Developing New Approaches to Support Bottom-Up Peace”**

*Participants:* 20 participants including team members, a representative of the OSCE, and local peacebuilders from the South Caucasus and Moldova/Transnistria.

*Objective:* The three-day experimental dialogue forum brought together participants from the South Caucasus and Moldova/Transnistria and allowed team members to share their

experiences in participating in peace dialogues and processes. The main objectives of the forum were: (1) to allow participants to share their experiences in current and past dialogue processes and to identify their shortcomings and obstacles, as well as best practices; (2) to generate new ideas and models for future peace dialogue processes; and (3) to explore opportunities for facilitating knowledge exchange between local and regional civil society actors and international third parties.

29 October 2019, Vienna, Austria: Workshop **“How Can Cross-Regional Dialogues Support the Transformation of Intractable Conflicts?”**

*Participants:* 18 participants including team members, representatives of the OSCE and the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), and local peacebuilders from the South Caucasus and Moldova/Transnistria.

*Objective:* This one-day workshop was the final event of the project; the draft of the OSCE Network report on the project was presented and discussed.

## 2. Field trips and interviews

### **Fieldtrip to Armenia**

**May 2018**

10 interviews conducted with people working in different local NGOs.

### **Fieldtrip to Georgia**

**October/November 2018**

8 different local and international NGOs contacted, 12 interviews conducted.

### **Fieldtrip to Moldova/Transnistria**

**November 2018**

14 interviews conducted with people working in different NGOs.

### **Fieldtrip to Moldova/Transnistria**

**February 2019**

7 interviews were conducted with people working in different local and international NGOs.

### **Expert interviews and consultations:**

Marina Danoyan (Eurasia Team, Crisis Management Initiative (CMI)),  
12 September 2018

Eiki Berg (University of Tartu),  
21 September 2018

Lucile Bardin, Marie-Charlotte Forgeron and Mikko Patokallio (CMI),  
1 November 2018

Ashot Sargsyan (youth activist), Skype,  
14 November 2018

Phillip Remler (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace),  
22-23 November 2018

Stefan Wolff (University of Birmingham),  
22-23 November 2018

Nino Kemoklidze (University of Birmingham),  
22-23 November 2018

Medea Turashvili (Georgian Institute of Politics), 22-23 November 2018

Kateryna Busol (Global Rights Compliance),  
22-23 November 2018

Iulia Cozacenco (Independent Expert),  
22-23 November 2018

Ida Manton (Diplomacy Dialogue (CSEND)),  
22-23 November 2018

Moritz Ehrmann (CMI), 22-23 November 2018

Sergei Rastoltsev (Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO)),  
22-23 November 2018

Mara Gubaidullina and Saniya Nurdavletova (Al-Farabi Kazakh National University),  
22-23 November 2018

Serena Giusti (Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies), 22-23 November 2018

Alexandra Matas (Geneva Centre for Security Policy), 22-23 November 2018

Ahmad Alili (Caucasus Policy Analysis Center),  
Skype, 19 December 2018

Michael Raith (Conflict Prevention Centre, OSCE), 17 April 2019





This report is the joint production of a group of institutes of the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions.

The OSCE Network is an autonomous OSCE-related Track 2 initiative. It is not an OSCE structure or affiliated with the OSCE or its participating States. The Network's 96 members are research institutions from 42 countries engaged in academic research and policy analysis on issues relevant to the OSCE's agenda. The Network is a flexible and informal format founded by more than a dozen research institutions on 18 June 2013 after discussions during the 2013 OSCE Security Days, inspired by a proposal made by OSCE Secretary General Lamberto Zannier in his inaugural speech in July 2011. It is open to think tanks and academic institutions willing and able to contribute academic expertise and policy analysis on OSCE-relevant issues. It provides expertise, stimulates discussion and raises awareness of the OSCE; it also shares expertise and co-ordinates joint projects and activities among its members. Neither the Network nor its members represent the OSCE, and the views expressed by Network members are their personal opinions and do not reflect the views of the OSCE.