

: Conference Report

Dresden Forum for International Politics 2018

sef:

“Sustaining Peace”. Current challenges for democracy

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Democracies were long regarded as guarantors of peace. However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that sustaining peace is an ongoing challenge even for established democracies. At present, many individuals or groups within society no longer feel adequately represented, and populist or extremist movements are gaining ground in many countries. Other challenges to democracies come from minorities' or regions' desire for independence. These issues, along with strategies for sustaining peace from the international to the local level, were discussed by around 80 participants at the Dresden Forum for International Politics on 8-9 February 2018. The first in a new series of events, the Forum was hosted by the Development and Peace Foundation (sef), the Free State of Saxony, Engagement Global gGmbH and the Frauenkirche Dresden Foundation.



Ballroom at Haus der Kirche – Dreikönigskirche, Dresden

Measuring peace

According to the Global Peace Index (GPI), which is produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace, excluding the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, the world overall has become more peaceful. The 2017 Global Peace Index finds that 93 countries have improved. However, the concept of positive peace is not just about the absence of armed conflict. The Institute for Economics and Peace has identified eight mutually reinforcing factors that sustain peaceful societies. In addition to economic aspects, they include good governance: achieving low levels of corruption, well-functioning government, justice and the capacity to address abuses with the potential to cause conflicts are particularly important. On its own, gross domestic product (GDP) is not a particularly informative indicator for measuring positive peace, according to Steve Killelea AM, Founder and Executive Chairman of the Institute for Economics and Peace, in his opening speech.

Democratic freedom vs. security?

In 2014, according to Freedom House (2015), there were 125 countries whose governments came to power in free and fair elections, making democracy the world's most common form of governance. Even post-conflict societies generally make it a priority to introduce or expand their system of democratic governance. "High-functioning democracies are the most peaceful, but this does not mean that every

problem can be solved by bringing democracy to the people,” Steve Killelea warned. In her opening speech, Judith Large, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Kent’s Conflict Analysis Research Centre, reflected that the essence of democracy has changed substantially over the past decade: “Two words seem to dominate the literature, reporting and discourse concerning challenges to sustaining peace



H.E. Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy at the Frauenkirche Dresden

through democratic governance for the international agenda: Those words are globalisation and security.” Paradoxically, many countries are now holding democratic elections, but this has been accompanied by the dismantling of political and personal freedoms, based on the claim that such measures are necessary to maintain our security. Ultimately, however, they simply increase our sense of insecurity. As a result, the values and norms which were previously integral to democracy – respect for human rights, freedom, equality before the law, open and respectful political debate – are being steadily eroded as well. We must address this paradox, also when introducing democratic structures in post-conflict societies. It is not only about redistributing power; it is also about focusing more strongly on local development and human needs and ensuring that these democratic values are not ignored.

Rebuilding democracy in post-conflict settings

Syria is currently a particularly challenging example of what needs to be done to rebuild democratic governance. At the public evening event in the Frauenkirche Dresden, Ambassador Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy, the United Nations Secretary-General’s Deputy Special Envoy for Syria, gave a powerful account of the colossal toll of the hostilities in that country. In addition to the economic costs, there is the immense

damage inflicted on society: the drop in life expectancy, the rise in poverty and the lack of access to education. In 2018 Syria, he said, there are numerous 1945 Dresdens, like Homs, Aleppo and Raqqa. After the end of the Cold War, Germans were able to unite and rebuild Dresden and the Frauenkirche, and he hoped that this could serve as a model for Syria too. You cannot make peace in the Middle East without Syria: a peaceful Syria remains a cornerstone for stability in the Middle East. What Syria needs, however, is a comprehensive nationwide ceasefire to create a conducive environment for a political process and fresh negotiations among the various groups. And while “peace must grow from within”, a UN-led process is the only one recognised as neutral and impartial by all sides.

Political participation for everyone

All groups within society must be involved in developing a new constitution: this is a fundamental precondition for a viable democratic settlement. The United Nations, with support from other organisations, is keen to facilitate broad participation by civil society and especially by women. However, women’s participation in the political process has been a neglected issue in Syria so far.

Hajer Sharief, co-founder of Maan Nabniha (Together We Build It) in Tripoli, also underlined the importance of involving women and young people in political processes. In her experience, it tends to be so-called “experts” who are appointed to the panels and committees set up at national and international level and who participate in many of the negotiations; the real-world experiences of those who have actually survived war and conflict are generally ignored. “I have managed to survive in a country torn apart by civil war. That makes me a security expert,” Hajer Sharief commented during the discussion. Surviving a war takes resilience, which is a valuable commodity in political processes as well. What’s more, people at the local level can act as a kind of early warning system, alerting the world to fresh conflicts.

“In order to prevent conflicts, we need to encourage conflict parties to engage with each other,” said Tanja Gönner, Chair of the Management Board of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. But how? That is the crucial question in most cases. This applies particularly to Israel and Palestine, where tight restrictions on movement between Palestinian and Israeli territory mean that young people have no opportunity to meet anyone from the other side. GIZ is therefore engaged in various projects, mainly through the Civil Peace Service (CPS), which facilitate dialogue, build mutual respect and dismantle prejudice. Violence, she said, is never the solution.

Vera Baboun, former Mayor of Bethlehem, emphasised how important it is for peace to grow from within. She also gave a very powerful description of the tremendous pressure on her country and its people resulting from Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories. The wall around Bethlehem, for example, makes any natural expansion of the city impossible. Many young people feel a sense of hopelessness about the future, and there are very limited opportunities for them to unlock their potential.

Radicalisation: a response to violence and oppression

Peaceful social relations are also strongly influenced by global politics and other external factors, as became apparent in the discussion about extremist movements. African countries have been hit particularly hard by extremist violence in recent years, with more than 30,000 people killed in terrorist attacks in the last five years alone. It is often assumed to be young people's lack of prospects that drives them to join extremist groups. However, Hajar Sharief said that in her experience, many young people were radicalised after global politics turned the person themselves or someone close to them, directly or indirectly, into a victim; in extreme cases, this might be a bombing by outside forces, for example. Rather than being religiously motivated, the radicalisation that she sees taking place is often political. Frequently expressed as rejection of the West, it is born out of a sense of powerlessness and a lack of understanding of why "outsiders" are getting involved. Rarely does

Programme (UNDP), wholeheartedly concurred with this subjective experience. In a comprehensive study of the motives of extremist fighters in Africa, he and his team found that for 71 per cent of the respondents, state-sponsored repression or violence had been the trigger for joining an extremist group. However, extremist groups themselves use a variety of tactics to attract recruits, with economic incentives certainly among them. These insights need to filter into prevention strategies. The current political and military responses to the rising popularity of extremist groups are wildly off the mark and often counterproductive.

Considering the needs of all social groups

The failure to deal with major social challenges is one of the reasons why populist movements are gaining ground, according to Dr Matthias Quent, Director of the Institute for Democracy and Civil Society in Jena, Germany: "We are talking about issues that are not being addressed at the centre, and this feeds extremist tendencies. This especially applies to rural areas, where ideological and 'tribal' niches can emerge. Extremist movements are often the only ones offering anything to young people here." There needs to be more engagement from politics and society, and this includes taking young people seriously. They should not gain the impression that their engagement or opinions don't matter to society at large.

Politics must consider the needs of all social groups, as became very clear in the discussion on separatist movements in democracies. Contrary to the popular belief that economic disadvantage is usually the main driver of separatist claims, a lack of political representation is often a key factor. As Professor Samir Kumar Das, Professor of Political Science at the University of Calcutta, explained with reference to India, demands for independence are not about greater economic development as the regions concerned are not economically backward.

The most striking example in Europe at present is the conflict over independence for Catalonia. Spain, still a young democracy, has a highly centralised structure, and regional demands tend to go unrecognised, according to Dr Marc Sanjaume-Calvet, Adjunct Professor for Political and Social Sciences at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona. Unlike Germany, Spanish democracy is not federalist in structure and has no mechanism of shared rule analogous to the Bundesrat in Germany. Catalonia's separatist claims are the outcome of constitutional weakness within this democratic system, Dr Sanjaume-Calvet explained. Economic demands are less significant. He was critical of the Spanish government's law and order approach, with its criminalisation of politicians and violence during the referendum in Catalonia. "This is a failed strategy which has not succeeded in stopping the



Hajar Sharief at Haus der Kirche – Dreikönigskirche, Dresden

it have to do with a desire for respect or recognition in an extremist milieu. Understanding this way of thinking is vital if we are to do things differently.

Mohamed Yahya, Africa Regional Programme Coordinator for the United Nations Development

independence movement,” he said. Encouraging more political participation would be much more effective in sucking the air out of the separatist movement.

Cities – a flashpoint ...

Democratic governance, political participation and inclusion are not only important at the national and international level; they have a key role to play in cities and municipalities too. Where communities co-exist within the narrow confines of the urban space, this can become a conflict flashpoint.

In extreme cases, the dynamics of a national conflict can result in a city’s physical fragmentation. Conflict parties are kept apart for the purpose of preventing violence, and this may be accompanied by the duplication of services and infrastructure (e.g. segregated schools) in a dichotomous city. This was one of the observations made by Professor Scott Bollens from the University of California based on his many years of research as an urbanist: “Violent experience shapes cities in the long term: it divides a city physically, compartmentalising it into no man’s land and no-go-areas.” In many cases, the separation of communities is state-led: in the case of Jerusalem, the government of Israel even chose to build a wall.

...and a nucleus of peace

Cities have a central role to play in sustaining peace. “Cities cannot prevent war, but local government can help to shape a culture of peace. We must celebrate successful initiatives and focus global attention more fully on the needs of local government,” said Dr Tarik Kupusović, former Mayor of Sarajevo. Sports and culture programmes or dialogue-based approaches can do much to promote peace within society.

Open dialogue is also encouraged by Osnabrück, known as the City of Peace. Here, there are examples of how conflicts can arise in an urban setting in an otherwise peaceful society. This is partly due to the widening gap between rich and poor, with some neighbourhoods at risk of being left behind. However, global factors can also have an impact on social relations within the urban space. Christiane Grewe from Osnabrück’s Office for a Peace Culture acknowledged that in some cities, immigration can pose a challenge to peaceful community relations: cities are the interface between diverse faith and minority communities, and this may result in global conflicts being played out within the urban space. Osnabrück’s Round Table therefore brings representatives of the various faiths together in an attempt to resolve conflicts at an early stage.

“Sustaining Peace”: an ongoing challenge for democracies

Over the course of the two-day event, it became very clear that peace – whether at local, regional or national level – can never be taken for granted, even in hitherto stable democracies. In order to strengthen social cohesion, all groups within society must have opportunities for political participation or be properly represented. The feeling of being left behind or not being heard fuels rejection of conventional politics and, in a worst-case scenario, can trigger violence and conflict. There also needs to be a sharpened awareness of the interdependencies between the local and the global level. Conflicts at the local or urban level cannot be viewed separately from regional or international conflicts and vice versa. The maxim that violence breeds violence applies across the board, and successful strategies for sustaining peace must take these insights into account.

Imprint

The Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) was founded in 1986 on the initiative of Willy Brandt. As a cross-party and non-profit-making organisation, the sef: provides an international high-level forum for shared thinking on urgent peace and development issues.

The reports to the conferences and events of the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:) provide information about the discussions and results in a compact form.

Published by
Development and Peace Foundation (sef:)/
Stiftung Entwicklung und Frieden (sef:)
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Translation
Hillary Crowe

Design Basic Concept
Pitch Black Graphic Design
Berlin/Rotterdam

Contents do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher.

Layout
Gerhard Süß-Jung

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