

Beyond High-Level Diplomacy: The OSCE and Intra-Societal Dialogue in Ukraine

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Abstract

Since 2014, the OSCE has actively supported intra-societal dialogue processes in Ukraine. These efforts involve promoting the use of dialogue for fostering social cohesion and supporting nationwide reforms in the territories controlled by Kyiv, including decentralization, citizens' involvement in government decision-making, and solving community problems such as the (re)integration of internally displaced persons and war veterans. This paper examines the OSCE's attempts to foster intra-Ukrainian dialogue before and after February 2022. It argues that the Organization's contribution to maintaining social cohesion through intra-societal dialogue and the professionalization of a local community of dialogue practitioners in Ukraine has been underappreciated. As the war continues, maintaining trust within communities and strengthening communication channels between central government authorities and the public remain critical to societal resilience. These efforts will become even more crucial in the post-war reconstruction phase. Given its experience and lessons learned, it is time for the OSCE to increase its engagement in this area.

Keywords

OSCE, dialogue, Ukraine

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Introduction

The OSCE's importance as a facilitator of dialogue has been widely recognized

by scholars and practitioners, its current crisis notwithstanding.² However, its contributions extend beyond providing a platform for high-level diplomacy and negotiations among participating States. The Organization has also supported multitrack dialogue processes between and within participating States, including Track 2 and Track 3 initiatives, which engage policymakers, experts, non-governmental groups, and (in the case of Track 3 initiatives) private citizens.³ The aim

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of this paper is to highlight this lesser-known part of the OSCE's work through a case study of its involvement in intra-Ukrainian dialogue.

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea and its covert intervention in Ukraine's Donbas in 2014, the OSCE emerged as a key international actor in supporting what became known as intra-societal dialogue in Ukraine. This type of dialogue was used to mitigate possible tensions in state-society relations and at the community level stemming from the armed conflict, though it did not directly address the armed conflict itself. Notably, it did not involve Russia or individuals from territories not controlled by Kyiv, instead encompassing dialogue between Ukrainian government officials—at both the central and the local level—and Ukrainian citizens in government-controlled territories, with a view to fostering social cohesion and supporting nationwide reform processes. Discussions focused on decentralization, healthcare and education reforms, citizen participation in political decision-making, and addressing local challenges such as infrastructure reconstruction and the (re)integration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and war veterans.

Between 2014 and 2022, intra-Ukrainian dialogue initiatives proliferated with support from international donors and Ukrainian civil society, facilitated by an already established professional community of local mediators and dialogue facilitators.⁴ Although the OSCE was not the only international actor involved in these efforts, it was a frontrunner in terms of the number of such dialogues con-

vened before the outbreak of full-scale war.⁵ Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed moment, triggering, among other things, a major identity crisis for the OSCE as a convenor and facilitator of dialogue among its participating States. But how did the war affect the Organization's support for intra-societal dialogue in Ukraine? What lessons were learned from the period preceding the full-scale invasion? And what challenges lie ahead?

This paper sheds light on the Organization's efforts to facilitate intra-Ukrainian dialogue before and after February 2022. The study draws on one of the author's experiences collaborating with the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine (PCU), as well as eight semi-structured expert interviews with former and current OSCE representatives and their local partners in Ukraine. These interviews were conducted in Vienna, Kyiv, and online between October and December 2024. Based on these insights, we argue that the OSCE's contribution to maintaining social cohesion through intra-societal dialogue and the further professionalization of the local community of dialogue practitioners in Ukraine has not received the recognition it deserves. Intra-societal dialogue—between Ukrainian government officials and citizens on the ground and within local communities—has not lost its relevance during the full-scale war. Maintaining trust within communities and ensuring effective communication between central government authorities and the public remain critical and will become even more essential during post-war reconstruction. Given its

experience in these matters, it is time for the OSCE to scale up its engagement in this area.

In what follows, we first review the OSCE's initial efforts to foster intra-societal dialogue in Ukraine after the start of the conflict in 2014. We then examine the three pillars of the PCU's dialogue-centered work: connecting Ukrainian state institutions and civil society through dialogue forums aimed at resolving community-level tensions, advancing the professionalization of local mediators and dialogue facilitators, and strengthening the dialogue capacities of Ukrainian state institutions. In the final two sections, we turn to the OSCE's support for intra-Ukrainian dialogue following Russia's full-scale invasion, reflecting on lessons learned and possible responses to the challenges ahead.

The OSCE's initial attempts to promote intra-Ukrainian dialogue

The OSCE began engaging in intra-societal dialogue in Ukraine at a very early stage of the conflict in 2014. In an effort to prevent further violence in eastern Ukraine, the PCU attempted to convene a National Dialogue in March 2014 that would bring together the central government in Kyiv, regional leaders from Donetsk and Luhansk, and other stakeholders. Although this initiative ultimately failed, it laid the groundwork for subsequent intra-Ukrainian dialogue efforts.⁶

Simultaneously, another development played a crucial role in the establishment of the OSCE's intra-societal dialogue

agenda in Ukraine. In May 2014, as violence escalated between pro- and anti-Euromaidan protesters in Odesa, Ambassador Vaidotas Verba—then team leader of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission Field Office in Odesa—met with the Odesa Regional Mediation Group (Ukraine's oldest mediation center) and its leader, Inna Tereschenko, to discuss possible approaches to mitigating violence. Their exchange resulted in OSCE support for the first-ever conference on dialogue in Ukraine in December 2014 and further dialogue projects in Odesa.

The OSCE's further engagement in intra-Ukrainian dialogue grew out of these early initiatives and was shaped by Verba's personal commitment to dialogue, as well as the presence of a self-organized and highly motivated community of professional mediators in Ukraine. After being appointed OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine later in 2014, Verba sought to reinvest unspent funds from the National Dialogue project into intra-societal dialogue efforts, viewing them as a way to maintain trust within communities and prevent outbreaks of local-level violence.⁷ He established close ties with Ukrainian dialogue practitioners, including the National Association of Mediators of Ukraine (NAMU), whose first president, Diana Protsenko, had collaborated with the PCU prior to 2014. Verba's active exchanges with local mediators and dialogue facilitators led to the OSCE's long-term commitment to local ownership in intra-societal dialogue in Ukraine and the institutionalization of dialogue-centered practices within the PCU itself. Consequently, dialogue support became

one of the PCU's strategic objectives from 2019 to 2021, and dialogue approaches were mainstreamed across all its activities. This meant that, in addition to the PCU's dedicated intra-societal dialogue projects, dialogue principles were applied across the PCU's activities, including in the areas of human, economic, environmental, and politico-military security.⁸

Connecting the state and society through dialogue

From late 2014 onwards, the PCU "rebranded and reinvigorated" the initial idea of a National Dialogue,⁹ transforming it into a series of projects including National Dialogue for Reforms, Justice and Development (2015–2016), Dialogue for Reform and Social Cohesion (2016–2018), Facilitating Dialogue on Reforms in Ukraine (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020), and Enhancing Dialogue Capacity for Reforms Implementation (2021).¹⁰ These projects aimed to support national reform efforts (including decentralization), promote more accountable governance and conflict resolution processes, and strengthen mutual understanding across Ukraine's diverse communities and regions (social cohesion), thereby contributing to conflict prevention and sustainable peace.¹¹

From 2016 to 2017, guided by these aims, the PCU focused on connecting the central government with regional and local authorities and people on the ground through a series of "forums." Given its limited resources, the PCU prioritized

conflict-affected, government-controlled territories in eastern Ukraine. These forums allowed government representatives from Kyiv to meet face-to-face with local officials and community members in Kramatorsk, Lysychansk, Mariupol, Severodonetsk, and other locations. Their goal was to address various challenges faced by local communities, including water and energy supply, environmental protection, demining, civil-military relations, and support for IDPs.

In designing these forums, the PCU relied on Ukrainian dialogue practitioners, who served as facilitators and co-convenors. This partnership was decisive in enabling a bottom-up approach to agenda-setting, whereby Ukrainian dialogue facilitators held preliminary meetings with potential forum participants to identify the most pressing local issues to be raised with central government representatives. The PCU ensured that facilitators had sufficient time and resources to coordinate the locally driven agendas. Moreover, the active involvement of Ukrainian dialogue practitioners made the forums more interactive, distinguishing them from the traditional top-down approaches that had long characterized government communication with local communities.¹²

Naturally, not all of the complex issues raised by local communities could be resolved within the few days of a forum. Retaining the central government's attention and persuading officials in Kyiv to travel to remote areas in the east (where the forums often took place) also proved challenging. As a result, the PCU adopted a more request-based approach in 2018,

organizing dialogues in response to requests from government agencies while maintaining the active involvement of Ukrainian dialogue practitioners in the design and facilitation of these events.

Despite some difficulties, the forums demonstrated that a constructive exchange between central government officials and conflict-affected communities on the ground was both possible and necessary, which generated further requests for dialogue.¹³ Moreover, there is evidence that these dialogues produced tangible results. Before 2022, for instance, the PCU convened a series of dialogues at the request of the Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories (MTOT, as it was then known), the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Education and Science. These dialogues brought together local government bodies, civil society organizations, and business representatives. One such dialogue focused on a municipal program that provided social support to war veterans and their families; as a direct result of this exchange, civil society organizations and a local government department agreed to share data on veterans' families on a regular basis and to begin work on a memorial for fallen soldiers. Another dialogue, which involved public consultations on a draft law developed by the Ministry of Finance, enabled civil society and business representatives to contribute concrete recommendations that were subsequently incorporated into the legislation.¹⁴ Finally, a long-term dialogue process concerning school education in minority languages (primarily Hungarian and Romanian) in villages and towns in

western and southern Ukraine brought together the Ministry of Education, local education departments, schools, and civil society activists, spurring changes to the implementation of the Law on Education. This helped to reduce inter-ethnic tensions within local communities and to establish regular communication channels between all parties involved in the process.¹⁵

While these examples are telling, the dialogues convened by the PCU and Ukrainian dialogue facilitators also led to less tangible (but equally significant) developments, including the personal transformation of participants and a greater openness among state institutions to engaging with civil society. The forums and other dialogue formats promoted intra-societal dialogue as a tool for building trust between different levels of governance and addressing social tensions in the regions. Most importantly, they ensured that intra-societal dialogue was integrated into the operational agendas of key Ukrainian government agencies.

Advancing the professionalization of local dialogue practitioners

Convening dialogues went hand in hand with another pillar of the PCU's dialogue-related engagement: the further professionalization of Ukraine's dialogue facilitator community and the promotion of local ownership of the process. Local ownership was at the heart of the PCU's work in general, which was partly conditioned by structural constraints. Under its mandate, the PCU was permitted

to deploy only three international staff members in Ukraine: a head of mission, a deputy, and a financial officer. As a result, the PCU office was largely staffed by local Ukrainian managers, experts, and administrative personnel. In addition to enabling a thorough understanding of the context on the ground, this allowed the PCU to quickly establish strong connections with Ukrainian partners, including local mediators and dialogue facilitators.¹⁶

The PCU proved to be flexible and responsive to the needs of the local dialogue community. At the latter's request, the PCU facilitated access to international expertise by bringing in prominent foreign trainers and organizing training sessions, mentorship programs, and exchanges with international colleagues. This knowledge exchange allowed Ukrainian dialogue practitioners to build on international practices and design a methodology for dialogue interventions at both the grassroots and the government level, specifically tailored to the Ukrainian context.

NAMU, an all-Ukrainian non-governmental organization (NGO) representing the interests of local mediators and dialogue facilitators, became a long-standing partner in the PCU's dialogue initiatives.¹⁷ In 2015, the PCU began funding annual conferences for Ukrainian dialogue practitioners, organized by NAMU, which served as a platform for professional exchange and development. The PCU also supported the creation of Ukraine's first-ever online course in dialogue skills, bringing together practitioners from different schools of thought to harmonize

their approaches into a coherent methodology. Since 2017, building on these methodological foundations, additional online and offline dialogue courses have been developed and introduced.¹⁸

The PCU was the first international actor in Ukraine to engage local dialogue practitioners not only as facilitators but also in preliminary conflict analysis, process design, preparatory work with participants, post-dialogue support, and dialogue evaluation. It was also the first to recognize that local facilitators were capable of offering a comprehensive range of services that had previously been the domain of international dialogue and mediation consultants. This bolstered the emergence of dialogue facilitation as a professional field in Ukraine.¹⁹ In an effort to strengthen this emerging professional identity, Ukrainian dialogue facilitators drew on their ties to the PCU in 2017, when Ambassador Vaidotas Verba published an article titled "Why You Need a Professional Facilitation for a Productive Dialogue" in a leading national media outlet.²⁰ The article served as an agenda-setting vehicle for dialogue professionalization and enhanced the standing of Ukrainian dialogue practitioners vis-à-vis other communities of practice.

The PCU also responded positively to requests by the local dialogue community for support in developing their own set of norms for conducting and funding intra-societal dialogue in Ukraine. In 2018, a group of Ukrainian dialogue practitioners, led by the Institute for Peace and Common Ground, drafted a document titled "Dialogue Standards: Definition and Principles." This document was a

bottom-up response to the wide range of dialogue concepts and approaches introduced to Ukraine by international donors in earlier years. It provided a common vision of what dialogue initiatives should entail, along with a set of principles to be followed by those implementing and funding intra-societal dialogue projects in Ukraine.²¹ Later, the PCU offered similar support to a locally led initiative to develop a context-specific methodology for evaluating the impact of intra-societal dialogue—a project that remains ongoing, even after the full-scale invasion.²²

Developing the dialogue capacities of state institutions

Given the PCU's mandate, the Ukrainian government was its primary partner and beneficiary, including in the field of intra-societal dialogue. From 2015 onward, the PCU began strengthening the dialogue capacities of state institutions, working with the MTOT and the Ministries of Infrastructure, Communities and Territories Development, Healthcare, Finance, Economy, and Education and Science, among others. The PCU's most sustainable partnerships were with the Reforms Delivery Office of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine and the National Agency of Ukraine on Civil Service. As with the professionalization of the local dialogue community, personal connections were key to designing and implementing dialogue capacity-building programs within state bodies.

The development of dialogue capacities within state agencies was intended

to address internal tensions (e.g., disputes between different departments) and to promote the use of dialogue and participatory approaches in their engagement with citizens. Thus, the focus was on institutionalizing dialogue practices within state institutions and integrating dialogue-centered approaches within their decision-making procedures, fostering a culture of dialogue within government structures.

Given the Soviet legacy of Ukrainian state agencies and public service, fostering an innovative culture of dialogue within these institutions posed significant challenges. Partnerships between the PCU and state agencies often began with introductory training sessions on dialogue skills for government employees. From 2015 to 2021, more than 7,000 officials from central and local government agencies and self-government institutions completed these trainings.²³ Of these, around 1,000 participants were recruited through the National Agency for Public Service's online system for continuous education, where an online dialogue course was offered as part of the curriculum for public servant professional development. Other trainees from state agencies were recruited by the agencies that had requested training from the OSCE. According to interviewees, these trainings spurred the emergence of mid-level "dialogue champions" within government institutions—officials who, after completing their training, began promoting new approaches to communication and dispute resolution within their respective agencies.²⁴

Most importantly, the PCU initiated efforts to establish a conflict management system within Ukraine's civil service. This system supported local dialogue practitioners in conducting research on internal conflicts within state agencies, analyzing international experiences in intra- or organizational conflict resolution, and developing recommendations for resolving disputes within local and central government agencies.²⁵ As a tangible outcome, these recommendations were endorsed by the National Agency on Civil Service through executive orders.²⁶

Post-2022 developments

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a watershed moment not only for Ukraine but also for the OSCE. As an organization that depends on consensus among its participating States in its decision-making bodies, the OSCE's ability to respond to the outbreak of war was hampered by Russia's veto and the blocking of all decisions related to Ukraine. As a result, the OSCE Permanent Council was unable to extend the PCU's mandate beyond June 30, 2022, forcing the mission to close its doors. However, an alternative means of continuing some of the PCU's previous activities emerged with the establishment of the OSCE Secretariat Extra-Budgetary Support Programme for Ukraine (SPU). Unlike the PCU, the SPU did not require consent from all OSCE participating States, as it could draw on financial support directly from individual states and the European Union. Formal-

ly launched on November 1, 2022, the SPU was designed to address urgent challenges posed by the full-scale war while also supporting the long-term democratic resilience of Ukrainian state institutions and civil society.²⁷

The transition from the PCU to the SPU was far from smooth. This was most evident in the challenges surrounding the signing of a new Memorandum of Understanding between the Ukrainian government and the OSCE—a process that ultimately stalled, leaving the 1999 memorandum in force.²⁸ After February 2022, PCU projects that had been in the pipeline before Russia's full-scale invasion had to be redesigned and approved by both the OSCE Secretariat and the Ukrainian government before they could be implemented by the SPU. This also applied to OSCE engagement in intra-societal dialogue. Consequently, a dialogue project that had initially been foreseen for 2022 was not approved by the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs until September 2023, delaying its actual implementation by the SPU until 2024.²⁹

The failure of the Minsk agreements to prevent full-scale war, combined with the decision-making deadlock in the OSCE Permanent Council, resulted in another major challenge for the OSCE: the complete loss of the Organization's perceived legitimacy as a facilitator of high-level diplomacy in the eyes of the Ukrainian government and society. However, the PCU's continuous engagement in intra-societal dialogue in the years preceding the full-scale invasion, its long-term commitment to promoting a culture of dialogue in Ukraine, and its reliance on

the principle of local ownership mitigated the OSCE's negative image among Ukrainian stakeholders who had previously worked with the PCU. Despite increased workloads and the adoption of new priorities after February 2022, long-standing PCU partners continued their cooperation with the newly launched SPU. These partners included the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, the Reforms Delivery Office, the National Agency of Ukraine for Civil Service and its High School of Public Governance, and NAMU. This continuity allowed the SPU to proceed with its dialogue-related work in the post-2022 period, building on the PCU's earlier initiatives.

As of January 2025, the SPU's work in the field of intra-societal dialogue has focused on training public servants in conflict management, building on the recommendations previously developed by Ukrainian dialogue practitioners. Additionally, the SPU is working to enhance the skills of local mediators and dialogue facilitators—helping them to operate effectively in a war-affected environment—and to develop a methodology for assessing the effectiveness of facilitated intra-societal dialogues. Since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainian mediators and dialogue facilitators have remained active, adapting their methodologies to incorporate mental health and psycho-social support approaches into community-based conflict management. They continue to convene and facilitate dialogues at the community level, as well as within and between government institutions

such as the Ministry of Education and the Reforms Delivery Office.³⁰

Lessons learned and challenges ahead

Looking back on a decade of engagement in intra-Ukrainian dialogue, the OSCE has shown a remarkable ability to learn from failure—as evidenced by the National Dialogue initially attempted in 2014—and to adapt to rapidly changing and highly challenging circumstances, including Russia's full-scale invasion. Despite the limitations of its mandate—such as its inability to implement Track 2 and Track 3 dialogues across the conflict line—the PCU has found its purpose in fostering a culture of dialogue and social cohesion within Ukraine. Furthermore, it has managed to cope with the challenges of bureaucratic inertia, financial constraints, and a limited number of international personnel on the ground by relying on local ownership and engaging Ukrainian mediators and dialogue facilitators as equal partners in implementing intra-Ukrainian dialogue projects.

Although many actors have supported intra-societal dialogue in Ukraine, the PCU has carved out two specific niches in this field: (1) strengthening the professional community of Ukrainian dialogue facilitators, and (2) building dialogue capacities within the civil service. These efforts have laid the groundwork for future intra-societal dialogue on a wide range of issues, whether related to refugee reintegration, demining, or government reform. Whatever thematic priorities the OSCE and the Ukrainian government

choose to focus on in the years ahead, they now have established methodologies, professional dialogue facilitators, and trained public servants ready to step in.

As the continued engagement of the SPU and local dialogue facilitators shows, intra-Ukrainian dialogue remains as crucial as ever in the context of full-scale war. Moreover, dialogue-based approaches to mitigating possible tensions in state-society relations and at the community level will remain highly relevant long after the active phase of the war has ended. The return and reintegration of war veterans, IDPs, and refugees from abroad carries the potential for within-community conflict. At the same time, miscommunication between government authorities and local communities risks fueling intra-societal discontent. Maintaining trust within communities and ensuring effective communication channels between central government authorities and the public—particularly in remote regions most affected by destruction—will be critical for post-war reconstruction and reform efforts. Given these challenges, the OSCE would be well advised to sustain and expand its work on intra-societal dialogue, drawing on its past achievements and lessons learned.

At the same time, there are a number of challenges that need to be addressed moving forward. One key issue is the OSCE's negative image in Ukraine, particularly since the start of the full-scale war. Remarkable stories of transformation—of both individuals and institutions that have participated in PCU and SPU dialogue training initiatives—

remain largely confined to confidential OSCE evaluation reports and the recollections of local dialogue facilitators, project managers, and participants. Developing and implementing a targeted awareness-raising campaign highlighting the transformative potential of intra-societal dialogue would help the SPU to secure broader support for its dialogue work from the Ukrainian government and civil society.

A second challenge stems from the fact that the PCU/SPU's continuous cooperation with a select group of local actors—both Ukrainian dialogue practitioners and state agencies—has had a negative side effect, described by our Ukrainian interviewees as a “donor trap.” Working with the same institutions and, more importantly, the same people for over a decade, while convenient, comes with its own risks; local actors may have fewer incentives to be inventive in their work with donors, while donors may become overly reliant on path dependencies, overlooking alternative ideas, approaches, and expertise. This risk is particularly relevant to the OSCE's intra-Ukrainian dialogue engagement, where the local dialogue community consists of a dozen practitioners who have become long-standing PCU/SPU partners. While such partnerships are crucial for continuity, the SPU would benefit from involving additional partner institutions through public tenders. This would ensure a steady influx of new knowledge and provide opportunities to test alternative approaches. To this end, the SPU could also promote the inclusion of a younger generation of local

dialogue facilitators in its ongoing and future intra-societal dialogue initiatives.

A final challenge lies in the tension between the OSCE's request-based approach to intra-societal dialogue—where Ukrainian state institutions, as the primary beneficiaries, initiate requests—and the SPU's (and previously the PCU's) limited capacity to plan and implement activities. In some cases, when the PCU and Ukrainian dialogue facilitators convened initial dialogues, participating institutions requested follow-ups and were open to initiating dialogues on other pressing issues. Yet, due to resource constraints, the PCU was often unable to meet this demand, leaving such requests unfulfilled. This challenge has become even more pronounced for the SPU, which has inherited the PCU's limited capacities and bureaucratic struggles while operating in an environment that requires dynamic and rapid responses. To address this, the SPU could strengthen its connections within the broader dialogue ecosystem, which includes Ukrainian NGOs and international donors, to ensure that requests for dialogue are not dropped but rather redirected to other practitioners beyond the SPU who have the capacity to respond. Creating an integrated system for information exchange among those supporting intra-societal dialogue in Ukraine would allow for a more strategic approach and for the optimization of these actors' collective resources in the years to come.

Notes

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