Synthesis of Common Challenges: Multifaceted Obstacle Course for the OSCE and all Parties Concerned

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The chapters in this edition have been compiled together in an effort to shed light on the complexities of the OSCE’s mediation work. Its aim has been to unpack the oversimplified narratives in light of the idiosyncrasies of the conflicts concerned, the peculiarities of respective peace processes, the institutional frameworks within which these processes unfold and the impact of geopolitical drivers on the conflict and peace process dynamics alike. A careful reading of the multiple experiences captured in this volume reveals a few common findings that cut across the diverse cases and can be summarised below in the following four main categories: (geo)political; institutional; process design related; and definitional.

1 (Geo)Political Context Factors

Effectiveness of any mediation process greatly depends on the environment within which it unfolds, be it institutional or (geo)political. Across the different contributions in this volume, we have identified key common challenges that are directly impacted by contextual factors such as conflict dynamics, geopolitical tensions and vested interests of third parties. The most obvious and frequent factor is the conflict parties’ lack of, or insufficient, political will, which can be impacted by their respective conflict dynamics. Third party will, in its turn, is directly linked to the geopolitical tensions and interests of the mediating states. At the risk of sounding redundant, it cannot be emphasised enough that there can be no political settlement without the necessary political will from all parties concerned.

Stalemate, Yet Not Hurting Enough – No Political Will, No Settlement
From Transdniestria, to Nagorno-Karabakh, Ukraine and Georgia, the authors point to the lack of sufficient political will as being a major obstacle to
achieving political settlement. When parties make their decisions based on their perceptions of the balance of power, security dilemmas and the lack of perceived hurting stalemate, there seems to be very little that the OSCE mediation frameworks can do to advance political settlements. Lack of political will combined with lack of trust does seem to be an overarching issue across the wide spectrum of conflicts and relevant mediation processes, which begs the question: how can third parties, in our case the OSCE, work on ripening the parties’ political will?

Before thinking of potential avenues for ripening the political will of the parties, however, it will be important to unpack the whole concept of political will (of conflict parties, but also of third parties in some cases) and undertake the cumbersome work of building this up within the confines of existing political, geostrategic and institutional limitations. It is important to mention that hammering the “political will” card runs the risk of downplaying potential limitations the parties might be facing in their respective political realities. As Crocker, Hampson and Aall rightly point out, “the motivations and the calculus of the parties are not simply utilitarian, but are intimately related to the parties’ own sense [of] identity, personal honor and perhaps even wider apprehension of certain social and political norms. When non-tangible issues are at stake, the successful mediator is one who can devise resolving formulae and/or offer appropriate symbolic rewards.”

Friends or Foes – Impartiality of Mediators

The above-mentioned dynamics are further exacerbated by geopolitical tensions that reflect poorly on the mediation work of the OSCE. Classic mediation literature would challenge the fact that in almost all of the cases covered in this edition, mediators happen to have vested interests in respective contexts, which hinders their impartial facilitation and gives rise to doubts as to their credibility. Paradoxically, the third parties, with their vested interests in the conflicts and their solutions, have refrained from using their leverage and have not wielded pressure on the parties to accept political settlements. At least on the façade, they seem to lead those processes based on impartiality and carefully balanced objectivity.

It is worth noting that despite the increased tensions between Russia and the West, there seems to be at least a nominal and face value cooperation when it comes to the mediation processes related to the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh (NK), Transdniestria (TD) and Georgia. In the case of the conflict

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