

Disputed Territories and Memory: Testing the agonistic memory mode for peacekeeping



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KEY FINDINGS

- Antagonistic memory, and the polarising narratives of 'us' and 'them', dominate narratives of national unity.
- Cosmopolitan memory, which is mainly championed by international organisations, aims to promote a new kind of universalism. However, these over-rationalised narratives de-contextualise the past and leave space for the rise of populist nationalist and far right movements to remain unchallenged.
- As an alternative, the agonistic mode of remembering aims to help communities develop a critical understanding of conflict and embrace mutual empathy to overcome potentially destructive antagonistic relations between 'us' and 'them'.
- DisTerrMem explored the potential for agonistic memory in peacekeeping and found that although the principles of agonism were difficult to translate into practice, in particular during or immediately after armed conflicts, it had the potential to help strengthen democracy and build resilience in the longer term.
- While examples of pure agonistic practices remained rare, combinations of cosmopolitan and agonistic memory resulted in more complex, inclusive memory practices based on empathy, dissensus, and self-reflection.

THE DISPUTED TERRITORIES AND MEMORY PROJECT (DisTERRMEM) 2019-2024

Dealing with competing and often antagonistic memories of disputed territories remains a pressing challenge not just within the EU, but globally. Territorial disputes are major causes of international conflict. Their impact on societies and individuals continues to be felt long after the political resolution of violent conflict. How the past is collectively remembered and understood plays a key role in framing the current perspectives and identities of communities, cultures, and individuals. This, in turn, affects the potential for future dialogue, understanding and peace.



DisTerrMem was a five-year research project funded by the European Commission. It brought together an international, interdisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners from five countries and seven organisations

who worked collaboratively to explore the management of competing memories of disputed territories across borders. The project focused in particular on border zones between Poland and Lithuania, in Armenia and in Pakistan. The contributors examined memory practices in different contexts, including state-promoted narratives transmitted through museum exhibitions, public commemorations, and school curricula, as well as bottom-up, alternative practices proposed by civil society and artists such as participatory walking initiated by grassroots organisations or street art and theatre performances.

The project aimed to test whether agonism can develop and thrive in different political contexts and explore how internal and external factors impact on the adoption of agonistic memory practices. Contributors specifically examined how agonism and other memory models affect national, regional and local identities and peacekeeping

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practices in three regions of the world: North-Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and South Asia.

THREE MAIN MEMORY FRAMEWORKS: ANTAGONISM, COSMOPOLITANISM AND AGONISM

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship has distinguished between two key approaches to memory: the antagonistic and cosmopolitan modes. Antagonistic memory relies on a binary notion of character, such as good/evil and victim/perpetrator and is commonly associated with monumental, celebratory and nostalgic forms of remembrance. By casting neighbouring nations as enemies, the antagonistic framework perpetuates feelings of hostility across generations, contributing to the persistence of conflicts.

Cosmopolitan memory emphasises the human suffering and human rights violations. Its narrative style is characterised by reflexivity, regret, and mourning. Adopted by the European Union to create a shared sense of identity after World War II, the cosmopolitan mode often seeks to transcend historical particularism to promote values that transcend national borders. By decontextualising memory, it involuntarily contributes to the popularity of antagonistic counter-memories proposed by populist nationalist and far right movements which are currently on the rise.

Unlike the antagonistic and the cosmopolitan modes of remembering which tend to simplify past historical events, the agonistic memory framework advocates for the social and historical contextualisation of conflict. Importantly, agonism encourages 'multi-perspectivist' interpretations of the past. Involving a wide range of voices and perspectives helps to challenge the one-sided, victim-focused narratives of cosmopolitanism and develop a wider understanding of conflict from different viewpoints. The intention is not to create an overarching narrative of the past, but to encourage empathy for different perspectives and experiences.

CASE STUDY: ARMENIA

In April 2016, Azerbaijan launched a military offensive against Armenian positions in Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-populated territorial enclave in south-western Azerbaijan. This reopened the longstanding rivalry over this disputed territory after a fragile ceasefire. Signed in May 1994, this treaty ended the First Nagorno-Karabakh



War, confirming Armenia's victory and control over 90% of the enclave's territory. The new Azerbaijani offensive was a prelude to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh war which erupted in September 2020, further radicalising the already polarised and competing national memories of previous conflict. As a result of a ceasefire in November 2020, Azerbaijan took control of almost the entire territory of the enclave. The latest Azerbaijan offensive, in September 2023, resulted in the expulsion of nearly the entire Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.

DisTerrMem explored how Armenia's memory policies were impacted by the upsurge of the conflict and the peace negotiations after the military defeat. On the one hand, it examined large-scale official memory practices involving the National Genocide Memorial and the annual commemorative march held on 24 April. It also investigated museum exhibitions and the 'Park of Life' project initiated in response to the war. On the other hand, it also

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considered examples of bottom-up memorialisation including street art murals portraying fallen soldiers and symbols of peace, as well as performance art such as the internationally sponsored collaborative 'Moush, Sweet Moush', aimed at promoting dialogue between Armenian and Turkish civil society activists.

The team concluded that, while state-sponsored responses to the war tend to rely on a predominantly antagonistic memory framework, civil society activists and some independent artists proposed alternative narratives based on a mix of cosmopolitanism and agonism. Agonistic practices were mainly embraced by an educated elite and depended on international sponsors and the Armenian diaspora in Western countries for financial support. With the eruption of the war, the supporters of agonism were silenced. After its end, there was a sudden shift towards a cosmopolitan framework.

CASE STUDY: POLAND AND LITHUANIA

Poland and Lithuania, as neighbouring states, share a history marked by two previous territorial disputes. From 1569 to 1795, they jointly constituted the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. While this period is fondly recalled by Poles as an era of tolerance and ethnic diversity under their leadership, Lithuanians contest this narrative, accusing Poles of minimizing the contributions of Lithuanians and Belarusians in forming this multi-ethnic state. A more recent source of contention between the two nations revolves around their struggle for control over Vilnius from 1922 to 1945. Lithuanians perceive Poland's annexation attempt as a historical transgression, for which they seek an apology. Poland, on the other hand, remains hesitant to express remorse and harbours resentment towards Lithuania's current policies regarding the Polish minority within its borders.

DisTerrMem examined top-down and bottom-up memory practices that have contributed to Polish-Lithuanian reconciliation, particularly in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in the region. The team explored how Lithuania and Poland were portrayed in their respective history and social science textbooks. The findings revealed that educational narratives from both countries did not depict each other as adversaries or allies but rather as partners united by common external threats, historically from Germany and presently from Russia. This shared proximity was further strengthened by the ongoing conflict in the region, leading to the hosting of Ukrainian refugees in both Lithuania and Poland.

The project also examined how art was used to facilitate self-reflection and cross-border dialogue. Examples included a theatre performance titled 'The Sejny Chronicles', as well as Polish museum exhibits and street art, which were analysed in comparison with Armenian cases. This comparison concluded that while agonistic approaches remained rare in the region, international influences, EU funding and the lack of 'hot' conflicts in Poland and Lithuania were factors encouraging narratives combining cosmopolitanism with agonism.

CASE STUDY: PAKISTAN

In South Asia, the project directed its focus on Pakistan, entangled in a prolonged territorial dispute with India over

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control of Kashmir. The period from 2016 to 2021 witnessed a surge in the activities of radical military organisations on both sides, leading to intense gunfire exchanges, coordinated airstrikes, and suicide bombings in border regions. This renewed hostility has deepened the rift in memories dividing the Kashmiri population, with the partition of former British India in 1947 being the most significant historical reference. Despite peace talks that made modest progress in February 2021, the situation in the Kashmir region remains tense, marked by the clash of two antagonistic memory narratives. This trend is also evident between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where armed conflicts reignited along the so-called 'Durand Line', their shared border.

DisTerrMem developed case studies comparing museums in Pakistan with those in Armenia and Lithuania. It found that several museums were used to disseminate antagonising national narratives developed at the institutional level, providing a highly polarised narrative of the history of the India-Pakistan conflict from the partition of India (1947) to this day. It observed some citizen initiatives to open up interpretations and narratives about the past to promote tolerance towards other religions and ethnicities and encourage democratic debates.

CONCLUSIONS: AGONISM FOR PEACEKEEPING

The DisTerrMem research team observed that, in situations of ongoing violent conflict, antagonism is reinforced by state institutions and other memory modes are marginalised. Immediately after the conflict, cosmopolitan alternatives may be favoured, particularly by international organisations, to foster a consensus for peacebuilding projects. Agonism is rarely embraced at state level and is mostly promoted by cultural practitioners and civil society. Additionally, agonism rarely appears on its own, but is blended with cosmopolitan approaches. Agonism is not a lasting approach that can be institutionalised but rather a moment of debate which can lead to new opportunities for dialogue and expressing dissensus without leading to violence. Since debate and self-expression are crucial to agonism, its impact is therefore the greatest in democratic contexts where



cosmopolitan approaches are already present and conflicts can be discussed in more critical terms.

THE ROLE OF KEY FACTORS AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS

DisTerrMem researchers observed that the presence of an active, dynamic civil society, as well as openness to dialogue and self-reflection, facilitates credible democratic alternatives to antagonistic approaches to the past.

Where agonism exists, it is predominantly promoted by civil society and cultural practitioners rather than states. The success of these agonistic interventions greatly depends on external factors including the state of democracy and civil liberties, the vitality of civil society, alliances between actors, and the presence and active involvement of economically and culturally autonomous artists and NGOs willing and able to embrace stances diverging from the mainstream.

Moreover, the most successful examples of agonistic practices examined by the DisTerrMem project suggest that agonism is often deeply intertwined with a cosmopolitan approach to memory. These agonistic interventions are often initiated by civil society and cultural practitioners, such as street artists critiquing official war memories in Armenia, a start-up organising walks in Pakistan to educate participants about the value of cultural and religious diversity, artists staging theatre performances at the Polish/Lithuanian border or involving Armenian and Turkish participants, and the curators of alternative exhibitions promoting agonistic remembering.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

CIVIL SOCIETY AND CULTURAL PRACTITIONERS

As a starting point, we recommend some necessary structural solutions directed at European institutions improving the overall situation of civil society actors and cultural practitioners in conflict-affected countries.

- Counteract the negative trend that is visible in conflict-affected countries especially after 2020 and consists in the gradual withdrawal of external funding for local civil and cultural initiatives. This is necessary in order to: (a) not to write off the work done in previous years and decades; (b) to provide local civil and cultural initiatives with structural conditions for the development of cosmopolitan- and agonism-oriented practices.
- Rethink the reorientation of the project funding model, based on short-term grants for specific activities, to a more stable model focused on building long-term, structural capacity of local and cultural initiatives. A key dimension of such funding would be the creation of physical cultural and artistic spaces (creative workshop houses, young arts centres, etc.) independent of local public/state funding as a necessary base for developing alternative civil and cultural practices and building trust between local activists and target communities.
- Rethink the patterns of expectations regarding the funding provided so that they become more in line with the specificity of local activists' work with target communities. Often this work is disrupted on the one hand by a lack of trust of funding institutions (evident in overly extensive reporting obligations), and on the other hand by over-regulation of the specifics of project work, which has the effect of alienating local artists and activists.

The following recommendations are directed to civil society actors and cultural practitioners:

- Advocate for inclusive memory frameworks: Civil society and cultural practitioners should actively advocate for memory frameworks that embrace inclusivity. They can play a crucial role in promoting narratives that acknowledge diverse perspectives and historical nuances, countering antagonistic approaches. This can involve the interaction of activists with academics/intellectuals to build feedback between practice and its theorisation.
- Engage in transparent processes: Civil society and cultural practitioners can ensure that collective memory reflects a broad spectrum of perspectives, contributing to a more inclusive national identity by actively engaging in transparent processes alongside state organisations during the development and dissemination of memory narratives.
- Consider future capacity building: Although situations of ongoing armed conflict can restrict the space available in the public sphere for the articulation of alternative memory models, civil society organizations can play an important role in keeping such models alive, even if they are only able to reach a limited audience. This builds the capacity for future dialogue, both within and across national borders. Civil society and cultural practitioners are not able to 'resolve' conflicts in the short term, and it would be unrealistic to expect them to do so, but they can create and maintain spaces for alternative approaches to historical memory that can be taken up in the future under more conducive circumstances.
- Advocate for transparency in state organisations: Civil society and cultural practitioners can play a role in advocating for transparency within state organisations. They can encourage state organisations to adopt memory frameworks that acknowledge historical reasons for past conflicts, promoting a shared national identity while avoiding obscuring underlying issues.

This Research Brief is based on the findings of the DisTerrMem Project and on the chapters of the forthcoming book *Pathways to Agonism*.

