Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan's speech at the panel 'Establishing Peace Zones in South Caucasus'

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wOSf_YCGiA&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1Az_X4m ipbYVujYPpPNduY9BjcESRYPbqK-vpHMB84S_AyLxlYGb9t42s

11:11-20:54

I wanted to welcome the movement of Jai Jagat and to say that my understanding of peace has been very much influenced by the thinking of Mahatma Gandhi and by the studies that have been done in the peace studies, and for instance, by the data that Steven Pinker brings about in the recent studies about peace.

So let's start from the understanding of what is peace for me. My claim is that peace is a daily behavior, a daily occurrence in the world, and it's very much linked to the law of natural world, because if there was no law in the natural world which wouldn't prevent negative occurrences, if there were a law, which would make the negative occurrences, so to speak, to happen more frequently than positive occurrences, the world wouldn't exist, and similarly, if human beings would not live in peace, they wouldn't exist, the human civilization wouldn't exist.

So we should understand, I think, that peace is produced and reproduced every moment of life, and therefore war or violence are particular occurrences rather than the rule. Even during the wartime, we have peace reproduced. War and violence are flashpoints immersed in peace, surrounded by peace. So to understand this dynamic between the two big concepts is very important.

Secondly, a few words on the situation with the coronavirus. I think it is very interesting what Alain Badiou said recently about the situation with coronavirus. He says that in the capitalist system, where states are national and the capitalist system is global, for capitalism to be reproduced, one needs global connections, and now, because of the virus, states have stopped global connections, and, in order just to survive, they are imparting support to the populations, to the participants in the capitalist system. So maybe for a short period of time, but they are acquiring, so to speak, a socialist position. I think this is a very important observation. This issue of the global system versus national ('nation' in the sense of state), nation-state distribution of the powers that can stop this global system, is also very relevant for the Caucasus.

One way that my friend and a great thinker (somebody who I hope Irakly also knows) David Hovhannisyan puts it is that the Caucasus is in a situation where the global system tries to disconnect every possible connection, every possible tie that exists in this region.

So every time when a positive new development happens or there is a potential for a positive new tie, there are some forces that come into motion to prevent and discard such developments and ties. We know, and nobody can deny, what are these forces, right? These are the great power constellations, which are coming into a game not to allow for that connection to take place.

So the world is vying over the Caucasus for disconnecting as many as possible connections and for not allowing for new connections to develop. This has come to a certain balance, which

allows, for instance, for an Armenian-Georgian connection to exist but doesn't allow for Armenia-Turkey connection, Armenia-Azerbaijan connection, etc.

And even in the case of the connections that exist – Armenia-Georgia or Armenia-Iran – these are limited connections, just like the pipeline that comes from Iran to Armenia has a very limited capacity. These are ties, which are restricted artificially by the powers, which have come to a certain balance in this region and do not allow new opportunities to evolve.

But saying that I am not denying our own responsibility, the responsibility of those who live in this region. I think it is proper to use the term "fractured region," the term that Anna Ohanyan is using in recent times. And in this fractured region, what is on the rise is false consciousness of nationalism, of extreme nationalism. That's why I don't want to confuse the word 'nation' with the word 'state' because we all know that the word 'nation' in our local languages means something different than in the American English, etc.

Extreme nationalism brews false consciousness, which is reflected in the mythologized past that we are being taught from the school times, and we are absorbing it and believing in it and building imagined, invented histories of our past as if the nation is a substantial ethnic nation, which existed within very clear borders in a pure way since the times immemorial. It is primordial, it is parochial, it is unique, it is the best in the world. This argument comes from all of the layers of the society, starting from the top layer – from the head of the government, to every schoolchild – and people already believe in that and they interpret the past history that way.

So this is the biggest challenge, I would say, which is not only supporting this fractured situation, but it is also brewing internal violence – violence inside the societies. – And here is one of those tenets that I have understood based on my experience: that if the society is violent inside itself, it cannot be peaceful outside, and vice versa.

So I think that in order to understand what to do and how to come out of this predicament we have to very much work on our own internal, self-inflicted violence, and it has deep roots. It comes with the Stalinist times, with the 20th century Soviet past, but also from much earlier times. It comes with the grievances. We should understand that violence is perpetuated. It's not only because human being is brutal, but also because there is an issue of revenge, because somebody has been aggrieved very seriously, and they are going to react.

So fighting false consciousness, fighting self-inflicted violence inside the societies, and establishing links, as many as possible connections, links, crossing these fractures across prohibited boundaries, so to speak, as much as possible. - I think that's the way forward.

55:47-1:14:45

I am afraid what I will say, what I think, will not be a very sought-after answer but let me look at it this way.

In the first period that I was working with International Alert, it was a period immediately after the collapse of the USSR, and at that time there was more of a commonality between different

groups than there is today. At that time, the idea of independent statehood wasn't yet fully absorbed by the populations. This mythologized nationhood story wasn't yet fully absorbed by the schoolchildren. Mythologized histories were not yet absorbed.

So we had kind of a dual situation. On one hand, three republics of the Soviet Union voted for independence and became independent. On the other hand, some of their ethnic groups that were residing there or populations, parts of populations with the territories disagreed with this process and themselves also voted for independence. The result was war.

However, there were a lot of people, including those who fought beforehand with each other, who had this feeling that they belong to the common space. Independently, if it was an imperialistic space or not, but they had this feeling, they knew each other, they worked with each other. Unions of writers, unions of cinematographers, etc., etc. We had several people like Sayat Nova. We had Sergey Parajanov who belonged to all of the cultures, we had many lesser-known figures, but these were people who had this idea of belonging to the same common cultural space, - and then independence and this state building, state construction of recognized and non-recognized entities starts.

So we had a dual situation. For instance, I remember, it is long past, so it's fine to say that once we had women's meeting in Tbilisi when Nino Burjanadze was the Chair of Parliament. Women from North Caucasus came via South Ossetia, essentially illegally, but Burjanadze had a meeting with them. There was a great discussion, and international donors were funding that, and these women were not prosecuted for crossing the border with no stamps in passports.

We had the Ergneti market or the Bagratashen market where a lot of illegal things would happen from the perspective of state building of self-constructing states, but these were also interaction platforms. Then the self-constructing state comes in and says, 'No, it is impossible. There should be taxes paid, there should be dues, blah blah blah,' and these markets are discontinued. So that's about the past. The thing is that today what we have are much stronger state identities speaking with each other, when two people from two nations meet, as different from that time.

Now coming to the environmental issues. We now experience, and this is not a secret, the so-called post-truth world. One of the biggest issues, as we all know, is fake news, is this entire falsehood in distributing information, absorbing information, is these conspiracy theories, which are widespread, and we saw another blooming of these conspiracy theories because of the coronavirus.

This is all supported by states in fact, and by other mercantile interests. This is a very interesting and very important phenomenon, and what it brings about, too, is, in a way, the impossibility to talk in an educated way, in an informed way about the big issues. But people are directed to talk about the big issues, not just the South Caucasus ecology, not just the Lake Sevan, but already the Black Sea region, and then we can start talking about the Three Sea Region – Black, Caspian and the Persian Gulf, and then we can start to talk about the entire Earth or at least about the Pacific Ocean.

These are all stereotypes, and people who talk about that, including decision makers, including specialists, they do not have the mind capacity to talk about that seriously. And they talk about that instead of talking about their next-door reality. They talk about that instead of making a small step, a small step forward to change their situation in their immediate environment. This is the problem. What you can see with your eyes, what you can touch, what you can act upon, you are disempowered from doing that, and your mind is taken by big, insubstantial, imaginary concepts, where you are already disempowered in advance to understand what is truth and what is false. This is the problem: that people are disempowered at the level of immediate action. As we speak now, I turned off the volume of my laptop when somebody else was speaking, because construction started again behind my window; and it's an illegal construction.

Yesterday I saw several new cases of trees cut because somebody decided to build a building right there, outside my apartment; and I am disempowered, despite the 2018 Velvet Revolution, despite the new government coming in place, etc., I am disempowered to make a difference in that situation. I am disempowered to save a historical building in Yerevan, and there are very few left because the previous government was just removing them, uprooting it all just as a matter of policies, but this new government has inherited such a complex corruption-linked system of decision-making about these issues that they are incapable of moving in a concerted way to address these issues of the need to preserve the historical buildings.

The question is now, because of the coronavirus, what is the best income source? Obviously, the best income source is capital investment in constructions, because there is no tourism, because many things are interrupted, etc. But construction is needed as always, and there is no wonder that construction was the first thing that was allowed even if the quarantine hasn't yet been discontinued. And so immediately a lot of constructions started, which cannot not have illegal element in them.

So in this situation, where myself, and also a huge amount of people who live in much worse situation in terms of democracy, are disempowered from making an action in their own neighborhood, have no means for having an influence, an impact in their own neighborhood (talking about global issues, forcing them to talk about global issues is essentially equal to brewing false consciousness). This is where we should start – from empowering people in their immediate acting capacity.

I always bring this example: when I was in America, I was in Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green is a small town in Ohio, it had 50,000 population, of which 25,000 were the students; they come and go. It was a long time ago, in 1994. They had their newspaper, Sentinel, and one of the biggest surprises for me was that this newspaper was publishing a lot of information about these 50,000 people, about their neighborhood, about their issues. This seemed boring to me – weddings and funerals and constructions and birthdays and stuff - but these were the news for these people. Because they had a community.

And in our world one of the biggest issues is the collapse of the community. In the Soviet times we were interested in what was writing Pravda, what was thinking Brezhnev, and today we are interested in what are Putin or Trump thinking. But this is all blah blah blah. We have no power

of influencing that, of knowing if it's true or wrong. We most of the time discuss the issues, which are bigger than ourselves, having no evidence about that, and we are disempowered from making decisions about our own reality.

And this is very much related to the issue of trust.

There is another very interesting thinker who I have discovered recently. Because I always look at Russia, maybe because of this Soviet heritage but, you know, it's easy, we all know Russian language. So one of the biggest pains that I have is that Russia today is in such a situation. In addition to the political situation, social crisis, economic crisis, thinking crisis, Russia seems to have lost the capacity of producing great thinkers, which it has always been known for. Even in the Soviet times, there were dissident thinkers. And when I find in Russia somebody who makes sense, I love it. So recently I have found this great social thinker, sociologist Vakhstein, and he was just talking about some very important things that are very relevant to what I am saying.

He introduced for me the concept of a *meta-city*. What is a *meta-city*? For instance, Yerevan is not a big city, but it is a *meta-city*. The *meta-city* is the place where no inhabitant feels that they belong to this city: they are all alienated from belonging to their city. So today we are all, independently if we are descendants of the Yerevan inhabitants or relative newcomers, we are all disempowered from being the community members of our city.

That's one concept that Vakhstein introduced. And the other thing that he talked a lot about is trust. I love this concept. The first time I started to think about it was when Fukuyama wrote his big treatise, *Trust*, and it was one of his best works, as different from many other works that he has produced. There he introduced the concepts of *high trust society* vs. *low trust society*. And now Vakhstein gives another, a more nuanced categorization of the types of trust. That is important because it comes to this post-truth society, because it comes to this tendency of us thinking about imaginary things instead of having the power to act. Vakhstein says that if people don't trust the government and if people don't have general trust, the trust in general sense, then only horizontal trust remains, they start trusting only people they know.

Now the next level is that in this situation, where both levels of general trust are ruined (in the government and the general trust), you trust horizontally, but then you trust somebody you know and you trust somebody who was referred to by somebody you know. And that's why, because of this lack of the general trust, conspiracy theories flourish, because inadvertently you start trusting the person next to who you know. And that's already a huge chance for this person 'next to your acquaintance' to infect you with a conspiracy theory. Because you don't know them personally, but you trust them. Because there is a desire, a place in human soul to trust, so if the 'correct' types of trust are unavailable, this space should be filled with something else. If that space is empty, it's being filled in by trusting the imaginary things and the things that one shouldn't be trusting.

So, I would say, **before thinking about peace zones, I would suggest thinking about trust zones**. Because the issue of trust goes quite deep into the things. We are talking about peace. There are peacemakers, people who work on peace, as those who are now in this group and others. But peacemakers don't trust each other as well very often. You know it very well.

And if there is a liberal person coming in… Imagine if I say, 'The Earth is flat,' and you say, 'The Earth is round,' and then the 'liberal' peacemaker, the mediator comes in and says, 'Yeah, well, you have your truth, and the other person has his own or her own truth.'

This incapacity of making a judgment on who is right, who is wrong, incapacity of deciding what is true, and what is false, and just saying, 'Okay, everything goes' - that's another 'liberal' attitude, isn't it?

This ruins also our trust, and our trust in peacebuilders in a different way, and this also ruins the opportunity for transitional justice that we are talking now about in Armenia. Because the transitional justice is exactly that thing: it is about making a judgment on who was right and who was wrong and then deciding how to deal with that. Then perhaps somebody apologizes, and that's all. It doesn't have to be a harsh punishment or something. But this capacity to make the judgment on who is right and who is wrong is what this attack of the false consciousness is directed toward: not to allow people to be empowered with the capacity of making the judgment, with the capacity to think independently. So, I would say, **islands of trust** and **islands of thinking**, **zones of trust**, and **zones of thinking** are the precondition for the next stage, for the peace zones. Thank you.