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PEACE PROCESS: ON SUBSTANTIVE DEFINITION

Ekaterina A. STEPANOVA,

ORCID 0000-0003-4666-4921, stepanova@imemo.ru

Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO), 23, Profsoyuznaya Str., Moscow, 117997, Russian Federation.

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Abstract. Prevailing formal, technical definition of the “peace process” reduces it to a more or less linear sequence of peace agreements. Such definitions lack substance and do not fully account for realities of contemporary conflicts and conflict management. Nor does empirical evidence support inherently positive interpretations of the notion of the “peace process” that are still widespread and create heightened expectations about such processes’ outcomes. During past four decades, two thirds of armed conflicts lacked any peace process. In the first two decades of the 21st century, negotiated outcomes accounted for just a quarter of all conflict outcomes. Nor do peace processes, launched due to war and mostly during war, require or quickly lead to sustained secession of fire that is more likely to take place at the later stages of the process. Realities of contemporary peace processes hardly match any “ideal model” of a linear process that leads to a comprehensive peace agreement. Full and final peace agreements are becoming less frequent, while on-and-off, nonlinear, parallel, fragmented negotiations, ceasefires, partial and local agreements proliferate. The very notion of a peace process as a mere sequence of formal written agreements is inadequate, even as individual agreements are easier to identify, code and count in respective datasets. The article argues that the way to define a peace process, identify and distinguish it from other conflict-related negotiations and contacts requires qualitative analysis of its substance. It inspects and revises two basic substantive criteria of the “peace process” definition that deal with what the parties are talking about and who the negotiating parties are. Unlike technical contacts or ceasefires, peace processes are not mainly about discussing forms and methods of warfare or its humanitarian symptoms, but are primarily centered on dialogue between conflict parties on key underlying incompatibilities over which the conflict has been fought. Such incompatibilities always have a political dimension (socio-political, ideological, related to ethnic/religious/socio-cultural identity, political economy, and international (geo)politics). The article suggests to place the main focus on the peace process rather than on individual agreements as its (interim) products. It also argues for making the need to address key incompatibilities at dispute a sine qua non criterion for any negotiations to qualify for a peace process. This allows to distinguish peace processes from more technical talks and most ceasefires, to account for a broader range of substantive negotiation formats (including initiatives that did not lead to an agreement), and to identify when a peace process starts (whenever talks on key contested incompatibilities begin). Decline in sustained, comprehensive, final peace agreements coupled with the rise in ceasefires, temporary partial agreements and locally negotiated deals do not necessarily imply decline in, or marginalization of, peace processes. On the contrary, this only underscores the imperative of handling a focused, substantive negotiation process over feverish “race for agreements” that are often premature or externally imposed upon the conflict parties. The second mandatory definitional criterion pertains to which armed actors’ involvement is principal or decisive for settling key incompatibilities and which ones could be sidelined and further marginalized with no major detriment to the peace process. The former include main military actors, with major presence on the ground and a degree of social support. These actors cannot be substituted for by international stakeholders/mediators or civil society groups. A negotiation format that ignores the principle “one does not choose one’s enemy/negotiation protagonist” and fails to directly involve representatives of the main protagonists on the ground hardly qualifies for a peace process. Fragmentation of violence and proliferation of non-state actors in modern conflicts further actualize the need to set certain limits for the peace process’s inclusiveness and distinguish key parties from smaller, more local or ultra-radical, irreconcilable actors. While a degree of armed actor’s social support is important, a decisive parameter is often an armed actor’s overall, especially military, potential sufficient to destabilize any peace process that it is not part of. At the same time, the range of potential participants in peace processes could also be reasonably broadened, especially with regard to non-state actors, to better reflect evolving conflict patterns. This could be done by extending the notion of peace processes to include substantive talks not only with, but also between major non-state actors. Local agreements and ceasefires could also sometimes be seen as part of a peace process, but only provided they are to some degree related to the conflict’s key political incompatibilities. Overall, a peace process should neither be seen as an end in itself to be achieved at any price, nor downgraded to a category secondary to a peace agreement. Of key relevance for defining and identifying a peace process is its substance, inclusiveness, and pertinence to central issues contested by military means. The article postulates and attests the primacy of (a) qualitative criteria and analysis for adequate definition of a peace process and (b) a category of “peace process” over peace/ceasefire agreements.

Keywords: peace processes, negotiations, peace agreements, ceasefires, armed conflicts, conflict outcomes.

About author:

Ekaterina A. STEPANOVA, Professor, Russian Academy of Sciences; Doctor of Political Science, Leading Researcher, Head of Peace and Conflicts Studies Group.

МИРНЫЙ ПРОЦЕСС: К СОДЕРЖАТЕЛЬНОМУ ОПРЕДЕЛЕНИЮ

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*СТЕПАНОВА Екатерина Андреевна, доктор политических наук, профессор РАН,
ORCID 0000-0003-4666-4921, stepanova@imemo.ru
ИМЭМО им. Е.М. Примакова РАН, РФ, 117997 Москва, ул. Профсоюзная, 23.*

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Аннотация. В статье ставится под вопрос доминирующее в литературе и базах данных “техническое” определение мирного процесса как относительно линейной последовательности формальных, положенных на бумагу соглашений. Не менее распространенное понимание мирного процесса как заведомо благой самоцели, ради которой все средства хороши, также критикуется как ведущее к завышенным ожиданиям и идущее вразрез с эмпирическими данными по эффективности и исходам современных мирных процессов. Постулируется и доказывается приоритетность, во-первых, мирных процессов по отношению к конкретным мирным договоренностям, а во-вторых, качественных критериев и характеристик мирного процесса и качественного анализа для его адекватного определения. В статье подчеркивается важность таких двух содержательных критериев определения мирного процесса, как его инклюзивность и то, насколько он сосредоточен на решении ключевых противоречий, оспариваемых вооруженным путем. Предложены пути пересмотра и доработки этих критериев с учетом реалий современных конфликтов и таких тенденций в сфере их мирного регулирования, как сокращение числа всеобъемлющих мирных договоренностей на фоне дальнейшего распространения перемирий, частичных и локальных соглашений.

Ключевые слова: мирные процессы, переговоры, мирные соглашения, перемирия, вооруженные конфликты, исходы конфликтов.

INTRODUCTION

Although the term “peace process” is widely used and common, it is characterized by vagueness and a certain internal inconsistency. On the one hand, the concept of “peace”, as opposed to the concept of “war”, *a priori* carries a positive meaning. The positive semantic content of the “peace” concept and its inherent positive meaning are implied *per se*, by default. The realization that “peace is always better than war” or “bad peace is better than good war” is not just a scientific thesis or a political imperative, but is deeply rooted at the subconscious level in any type of society. For those who have survived the war, experienced the impact of armed conflict, or live in (post)-conflict zones and countries that were or remain areas of conflict it is especially obvious that no matter how high the cost of peace is, it is always lower than the cost of war.

On the other hand, against this background, there is a somewhat inevitable tendency to confuse the concepts of “peace” and “peace process” and to mix up one with the other. At the same time, the positive perception of the concept of “peace” and

the positive associations with it are automatically transferred to the category of a “peace process”. As a result, a peace process, as a rule, is initially perceived and thought of as something good and positive by definition. This often leads to it to be seen not so much as a complex process, but as an end in itself, which must be supported and promoted at any cost. By analogy with the realization that “peace is always better than war”, an illusion is created that a peace process is always better than its absence, regardless of the quality, sustainability, and effectiveness of a particular peace processes. This perception has not been empirically confirmed or proven scientifically. Despite this, anyone who disagrees with it or opposes a peace process is almost automatically declared an enemy of peace.

Of course, such an approach may be dictated by the political priorities of the participants and sponsors of a particular process, including those not related to the task of achieving peace. However, many quite sincerely interpret and perceive a peace process as something unambiguously positive and positively charged. This understanding is widespread,

if not predominant, in international media, political, humanitarian, and other circles, as well as in various national contexts in different regions of the world.

The reverse side of the positive-idealistic interpretation of the notion of peace process is high expectations about its outcome. The point is not only that it is implied that a peace process in and of itself must lead to sustainable peace *in the end* (which does happen, but not always). An even bigger problem lies in the widespread notion that any peace process itself must bring and guarantee a significant reduction or cessation of armed violence, either immediately with the start of peace negotiations or during them (which in reality in many cases does not occur) and that violence should definitely disappear completely after the conclusion of a peace agreement (which is not often the case).

In this sense, the longest peace process of the present time is indicative – the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations (the Oslo process)¹ conducted since 1993 in the development of the Arab-Israeli agreements of the 1970s, during which, in fact, the term “peace process” emerged. It is symbolic that 30 years after the beginning of this peace process, it is much easier and more adequate to explain it in terms of ongoing confrontation, a series of failures and political impasse than “peace” [1, 2, 3]. Not surprisingly, the ambiguous or failed outcomes of many peace processes have at times called into question or discredited the very concept, especially in those regions and (post)-conflict areas that have experienced peace processes that ended in failure in the absence of any positive results or even in the resumption of armed confrontation. Against this background, there were attempts to deconstruct the term itself – to separate the concepts of “peace” and “process” or even to oppose one to the other, as, for example, in a typical criticism of the Palestinian/Arab-Israeli negotiations: “the peace process can drag on indefinitely... by definition, as long as the ‘peace process’ is going on, there will be no peace” [4].

Despite this, inflated expectations in connection with the concept of a peace process continue to prevail, at least in the public and political perception. A complimentary perception of this category is also observed within a significant part of the academic

¹ The Oslo Peace Process takes its name from the venue of the negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization that have been ongoing since 1993 and led to the Oslo I Accord (in Washington in 1993) and Oslo II Accord (in Taba in 1995).

and expert discourse, including some of its best representatives [5, 6].

A certain exception is posed, for example, by those few specialists who work with big data on conflicts and peace agreements/processes and with related databases. They include the Uppsala Conflict Data Program Peace Agreements Dataset (PA/UCDP), a collection of databases on peace agreements at the University of Edinburgh (Peace Agreements Database, PA-X), Peace Accords Matrix (PAM) of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies of the University of Notre Dame, the Political Agreements in Internal Conflicts (PAIC) Dataset of the University of Birmingham, the UN Peacemaker etc. Although groups of researchers, all of neo-positivist bent, who work on these databases, are, as a rule, free from excessive idealism and an evaluative approach, they are also far from solving the problem of defining a peace process. They reduce the concept of a peace process to the conformance to some formal, instrumental, and technical features and see it as a secondary notion that derives from the concept of a peace agreement. Although the range of interpretations of peace agreements is also very wide, it is simply easier for the “quants” to accept them as the main unit of analysis and count them. If the category of a peace process is addressed by adepts of this approach at all, it is only seen as a certain linear sequence of peace (and ceasefire) agreements, regardless of the quality, composition, and other substantive characteristics of the negotiation process. At the same time, for example, this approach ignores the fact that negotiations, including those on key contradictions between the main parties to the conflict held with their direct participation, can begin and develop long before the conclusion of a peace agreement, be conducted for a long time in a formal, informal, or semi-formal manner in the absence of any essential agreements, or, indeed, may not lead to any agreement at all. It is not surprising that there are still no special databases on peace *processes* as such, as well as an adequate definition of the “peace process” *per se*. All this underscores once again that by reducing the problem to the collection and analysis of big data or, more broadly, to the framework of a quantitative approach, it is in principle difficult to identify those qualitative, substantive characteristics that should form the basis for the definition of the peace process and designate its temporal and notional boundaries.

So, while conventional, benevolent-idealistic interpretations of the category “peace process” poorly reflects the real effectiveness and prevalence of such

processes, its instrumental-technical definition is still devoid of qualitative and conceptual-theoretical content, although it retains some applied meaning for practitioners (diplomats, negotiators), data scientists and database experts, etc. Under these conditions, it is high time to return to the problem of defining the concept of a “peace process”. This article attempts to address this issue:

a) in a more objective and realistic way that at least does not contradict the available empirical data on the effectiveness and sustainability of peace processes and is more in line with the realities of contemporary conflict resolution;

b) at the conceptual and theoretical level rather than just at the applied level;

c) with an emphasis not so much on formal technical parameters as on the qualitative, substantive, and essential characteristics of the peace process.

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

The term “peace process” is still rather vague. Technically, it is usually understood as a negotiation process aimed at reaching a peace agreement (and often the subsequent process of its implementation), as well as a sequence (series) of peace agreements to resolve the same conflict [7]. This distinguishes a peace process, no matter how broadly it is interpreted, from the more general concepts of conflict management and conflict resolution.

To begin with, it is necessary to clarify the very concept of negotiations, or the negotiation process, which has its own specifics when it comes to armed conflict management. Can any contacts between, for example, the conflicting parties and other participants in the conflict or the process of its management be considered negotiations as such? No, not any, but only those that involve a bilateral exchange of concessions and offers of compromise with the opposing side and the readiness of the parties for such an exchange. This is an important clarification. First, negotiations involve dialogue, whether direct or indirect, with the opposing side and its representatives (rather than simply “comparing notes” or touching base with partners and allies or coordinating factions or groups loyal to one party or the other). Second, whatever the negotiation strategies and the initial bargaining positions of the parties are, if the protagonists are in principle not ready for mutual concessions and compromises in the course of mutual contacts, then this is not a negotiation process, but its imitation for some purpose (in fact, such a process does not

go beyond mere contacts between the parties). Third, negotiations *per se* can be interpreted both more narrowly (direct dialogue/bargaining between representatives of the parties at the negotiating table) and more widely (including the entire set of contacts and actions of the parties related to the negotiation process on the sidelines and outside the negotiating table).

Using the standard UN lexicon, organizing, negotiating, and promoting peace (*peacemaking*) is distinct from operations to support peace (*peacekeeping*), actions to enforce peace (*peace enforcement*), and activities to restore and sustain peace after conflict (*peacebuilding*) [sources 1, 2].

So, in a technical, applied sense, a peace process is a process focused on a peace agreement or a series of agreements at the stages of their achievement/preparation, conclusion, and implementation. For example, the Dayton peace process on Bosnia involved the negotiation process that led to the conclusion of the Dayton Accords of 1996, and the process of implementation of their main provisions that lasted for many years.

DO PEACE PROCESSES LEAD TO PEACE?

An overly positive perception of the concept of a peace process generates heightened expectations regarding the success of such processes. Such expectations are often in conflict with the realities in contemporary conflict management, outcomes, prevalence and effectiveness of negotiated conflict solutions. These realities are rather ambiguous.

In the first years after the end of the Cold War, the world experienced a short-term surge of optimism about the prospects for the peaceful resolution of conflicts [source 3]. However, long-term trends in this area are much less encouraging. For more than three decades through the early 2020s, peace processes have been going on with varying success, to put it mildly. One can draw this conclusion from available statistics by answering three questions:

– What is the proportion of armed conflicts in which any peace processes and peace agreements have taken place in recent decades?

– How often do armed conflicts end in negotiated solutions compared to other types of conflict outcomes?

– When peace processes do not just take place, but also do lead to a peace or ceasefire agreement,

how stable is this outcome of the conflict, i. e., do the same conflicts resume at least in the course of the next few years?

On the first question: according to PA/UCDP, in 1975–2021, 375 peace agreements were concluded worldwide in 152 peace processes. However, they affected only 34% of all conflicts during this period (calculated by the author from [source 4]). In other words, in almost two-thirds of armed conflicts of the last quarter of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st century, peace processes and agreements were not observed at all.

The second question concerns not just the fact of an ongoing peace process (agreement), but, more specifically, the outcome, or termination, of an armed conflict through peace negotiations.

In the 1950s–1970s, military solutions still prevailed as a conflict outcome worldwide, accounting for more than half of all outcomes [source 5, p. 174]. However, with the increase in the number of civil wars, military victories in them became less and less frequent. With further fragmentation, deconstructurization, and transnationalization of conflicts, and with a growing number of conflict actors, especially non-state actors, this trend only intensified: out of 160 conflict outcomes recorded over the first two decades of the 21st century, military solutions amounted to only 12% (calculated by the author from [source 6]).

While during the Cold War, the share of peaceful solutions for intrastate conflicts did not yet exceed 20% of their outcomes, by the end of that period the number of both peace processes and negotiated conflict outcomes reached through peace or ceasefire agreements started to grow. In the early 1990s, the share of such outcomes in civil wars even temporarily increased to 40% [source 5, p. 174]. However, in the new century, in 2001–2020, negotiated solutions (peace agreements and ceasefires) already accounted for only a quarter (25%) of all conflict outcomes (calculated by the author from [source 6]).

At the same time, the new global peak of conflicts observed since the mid-2010s (the highest one since 1946) was no longer accompanied by a proportional increase in the number of peace agreements, in contrast to the previous conflict peak of the early 1990s. At that time, the temporary sharp increase in the number of conflicts after the end of the Cold War was, however, accompanied a significant detente of international tensions: it was in 1991–1994 that the highest number of peace agreements (82, or an average of about 20 per year) was recorded for almost half a century since 1975 [8, p. 594; source 4, 7]. If

one takes into account not all peace agreements, but only those that actually did lead to resolution of a conflict, i. e., only successful, sustainable negotiated outcomes, then at the new peak of conflicts in the second half of the 2010s, there was only one such outcome, which is seven (!) times lower than in the early 1990s [9, p. 20].

On the third question: contrary to a common misconception among pacifists and other neo-idealists, according to statistics, military solutions remained the most stable type of conflict outcome, which, due to the defeat of the enemy and/or through undermining its military potential, least often led to resumption of armed violence in the course of subsequent years. Thus, for the period from 1946 to 2004, only 18.3% of civil wars ended by military means resumed within the next five years [source 5, pp. 173–175]. Negotiated peace solutions were almost two times less stable than the military ones: over the same period, about 35% of all civil war outcomes reached through negotiations led to a resumption of the conflict within five years [source 5, p. 175]. Nevertheless, on average, in two-thirds of cases, peace and ceasefire agreements did work. This indicates that if conditions and a “window of opportunity” for a peaceful settlement emerge, they should be used to the maximum.

It should be emphasized that a relatively stable solution to the conflict, both negotiated and military, is most likely in relatively structured conflicts, with a limited number of participants, i. e., in a type of conflict that is becoming less and less common at the present stage [10]. It is not surprising that at the beginning of the 21st century, a different type of conflict outcome prevailed – the waning of conflicts to a low level of violence and a state of “no peace, no war”, in the absence of any clear, definite solution. In 2001–2020, such inconclusive conflict outcomes accounted for 57% of the total (calculated by the author from [source 6]). The decline of violence down to a level below an armed conflict, in the absence of either peaceful resolution, or military solution, points at underregulated or self-regulating nature of the conflict. It also underscores that this is not so much with a final outcome that is in place, but a temporary decrease in the intensity of violence that may drag on, but threatens to recur and lead to resumption of hostilities at any moment.

So, while solutions to conflicts achieved as a result of peace processes are relatively stable in two-thirds of cases, they are not the dominant form of

contemporary conflict resolution and accounted for only a quarter of conflict outcomes in the first two decades of the 21st century. Furthermore, in almost two-thirds of all conflicts that took place over the past 40 years, there were no peace processes at all. Moreover, the initiation of a peace process – due to war and usually during a war – does not yet mean or require an immediate and sustainable ceasefire, and most sustainable ceasefires are concluded at later stages of the peace process [11].

Thus, a peace process is neither the most common way to end an armed confrontation nor a panacea for resolving a conflict. In principle, idealistic interpretations and evaluative connotations of this concept should be avoided both in the academic sphere and in applied analytics and practical diplomacy. This term is useful only when it is neutral and designates no more, but no less than a road to peace. The fact that the final destination is a state of peace instead of an armed conflict does not yet in itself guarantee that the right road to peace is chosen, that this road does not twist or go in circles, or that all of those who move along this road follow road signs, basic traffic rules and are able to quickly adapt to changing traffic situation.

PEACE AGREEMENTS AND PEACE PROCESSES

In terms of definitions, the question of what is primary and what is more important – a peace process or a peace agreement – is hardly as idle as it might seem at first glance. The vast majority of existing definitions refer specifically to “peace agreements” and not to “peace processes”. The main unit of analysis in all databases in this field is a peace agreement (ceasefire), not a peace process. If a “peace process” is defined in academic literature and database methodology, it is usually treated as a secondary, technical derivative or progression from the concept of a “peace agreement”. In the case when even a substantive peace process, for some reason, does not lead to the conclusion of a peace agreement, it rarely becomes the subject of study and sometimes it is not taken into account at all, including in databases.

Why is this a problem? Why should it rather be the other way around? Why is it necessary to start with a substantive, qualitative definition of a “peace process”, one of the (often intermediate) products and “units” of which may or may not be a peace agreement?

On the one hand, a case in point is the broadest existing definition of a “peace agreement” was formulated by the specialists of the Edinburgh PA-X database. This definition refers to any “formal, signed, written agreements in armed conflicts” [12, p. 25] – it is not surprising that for the period of over 30 years, from 1990 to April 2022, the PAX recorded a lot of such accords (1,959) [source 8]. Even purely technical agreements fall under this definition – for example, the ones on the exchange of prisoners or body swap – as long as they are on paper. Should the concept of a “peace process” be tied to such a hollow definition? Surely, not.

On the other hand, there are narrower and more specific definitions of a peace agreement – for example, PA/UCDP [source 4] and PAM of the University of Notre Dame [source 9] take into account only full-fledged agreements on major political issues contested in armed confrontation. However, such definitions are often too narrow to serve as a basis for defining peace processes, if only because they are less and less consistent with the realities of conflict management in the 21st century. In modern conflicts, there are relatively fewer full-fledged, comprehensive peace agreements, including those reached as a result of international negotiations. Other negotiating formats, ceasefires, and local agreements, including those reached through the mediation of a third party, are becoming more widespread. This is not to mention the fact that negotiation processes, even substantive ones (i. e., the ones that are conducted with the participation of representatives of the conflicting parties and address key incompatibilities disputed by them) do not always lead to the conclusion of peace agreements.

In general, it is far from easy to determine how a peace agreement (a set/series of agreements) correlates and is interconnected with a peace process, since the focus is on a *process*, and often on a *non-linear* one.

According to the dominant interpretation of a peace process as a secondary, technical category, it is at best understood as a series of peace agreements. A peace agreement itself is, in turn, considered in databases as a monolithic unit of calculation and analysis, and the criteria for linking data on individual agreements to a particular peace process are vague and not clearly defined. Since this approach suggests a rather schematic sequence “from one agreement to another”, it hardly makes it possible to find out when a process actually begins and ends: there are no criteria for identifying which agreement is considered the beginning of the peace process, and which marks

its completion. It may also be difficult to identify the sequence of agreements and the extent to which subsequent agreements stem from the previous ones, form an extension of earlier accords and belong to the same peace process or to determine when an agreement no longer serves as a continuation of previously reached ones, but marks the start of a qualitatively new peace process.

This approach is based on the traditional understanding of a peace process as a kind of “ideal abstraction” – a linear, sequential, relatively clearly structured process, the functional components of which are separate agreements aimed at solving problems of various types and levels at different stages of this process. This ideal model is a sequence of agreements of different types that make up the peace process and allow it to move incrementally from one stage to another, onward and upward [12, p. 29; 13]. In its longer and more detailed form, this ideal sequence, or scheme, may include:

- Preliminary agreements on the format of future negotiations and on the list of issues that are planned to be discussed;
- Ceasefire agreements;
- Intermediate or partial agreements (sometimes in the form of framework agreements or agreements of intent), which should prepare the ground for solving key issues;
- Final – full-fledged, comprehensive or status agreements (substantive agreements) that ideally should resolve the main incompatibilities between the parties;
- They may be followed by additional agreements on implementation of the terms of substantive accords, as well as agreements confirming or updating such accords, or agreements on the fulfillment of their conditions and/or extending their validity (or validity of specific provisions).

This orderly progression falls short of trends in contemporary conflicts and peace agreements that point to a more complex and confusing “path to peace” in the form of a negotiation process. At best (and statistically less and less often), this path ends with a comprehensive, substantive settlement resulting from a comprehensive peace agreement and, in practice, it often ends with negotiations to minimize damage after the failure of a peace settlement. The realities of modern peace processes categorically do not fit into the “ideal model”: these processes are moving further and further away from the presumed linear progression and are increasingly

discontinuous, uncoordinated, highly competitive, and even disorderly or semi-chaotic. Parties to negotiations often do not comply with the agreements already concluded, fully or partially renounce them, from time to time start new negotiations, including in changed formats, sometimes return to earlier agreements and often come back to full-scale or limited armed confrontation.

It is difficult to identify the time limits of peace processes under such conditions. This is a hard task at their initial stage, when dialogue or multilateral consultations are often held on an informal basis, and various draft settlement plans (which do not amount to “agreements” yet) are generated and circulated before the start of official negotiations and well before the first formal agreements. This task is no easier at the final stage of the process, for example, when the implementation of a number of peace agreement provisions requires their legislative approval, including at the constitutional level.

Against this background, the very understanding of a peace process solely as a series of formal agreements put on paper is inaccurate. It is clear that individual peace agreements are easier to identify and calculate, especially for methodologists of the relevant databases. However, the specifics and limits of their methods and of quantitative analysis in general should not distort the essence and nature of peace processes. From a methodological point of view, there is no doubt that a peace process cannot be adequately defined and qualified as such *without a qualitative analysis of its substantive content*. It is the primacy of the qualitative characteristics of the peace process, including for its definition, categorization, codification, and analysis, that explains why not a single database with a peace process (rather than a peace agreement) as the main unit of analysis has yet been created [13, p. 6].

In sum, not all contacts between the conflict parties qualify for negotiations, and not all negotiations reach the level of a peace process. The formal technical definition of a peace process and its linear model, reduced to a certain sequence of various agreements, are of little substance and poorly take into account the realities of modern conflicts and their settlement. A substantive definition of a peace process is needed, focusing not only and not so much on the fact of negotiations and agreements, but on their *content* and *quality*. What qualitative criteria make it possible to classify negotiations conducted during the conflict and its settlement as a peace process?

CRITERIA FOR DEFINING A PEACE PROCESS

Criterion 1: negotiations about what? The first and most important criterion for a meaningful definition of a peace process is its focus on the core issues of incompatibility between the parties to the conflict.

Strangely enough, in some academic, expert and other circles, this fundamental criterion and the *raison d'être* of the peace process has not just stopped to be mandatory, but sometimes is even pushed into the shadows. A case in point is one of the latest definitions of a peace process formulated by the methodologists of the Edinburgh PA-X database. According to it, a peace (or transition) process is “a formal attempt to bring the political and/or military protagonists in the conflict to some form of mutual agreement on how to end the conflict” [14, p. 2]. Markedly, the definition of a peace process by methodologists of this largest collection of databases on peace agreements does not at all include (!) the need for the participants in the process to focus on key issues disputed by the parties by military means, i. e. those incompatibilities over which the war is fought.

This partly goes against tradition. A number of more classical definitions formulated in the late 20th – early 21st century, mainly based on the two best researched peace processes in Western literature – the Middle East (Arab-Israeli/Palestinian-Israeli) and the Northern Ireland cases – at least did not question the focus of the peace process on resolving the key issues at dispute between the parties as one of the criteria for identifying such a process and assessing its success. Nevertheless, even for such leading experts in this field as Darby and McGinty, this is just one of five (although one of the two main) criteria for success, and only in relation to particular agreements. With regard to peace processes, this criterion is somehow implied by them, but not articulated: peace processes are defined as “peace initiatives in which the main antagonists in a protracted conflict are involved” [15, pp. 2-3]. Scholars of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program pay more attention than others to the need for the conflict parties to directly regulate or resolve those key contradictions between them, over which an armed confrontation is being waged. However, they also use this criterion primarily to define and identify individual peace agreements to be included in the PA/UCDP database. Although Wallerstein and his Uppsala colleagues link agreements to corresponding peace processes, for them, as for all quantitative methodologists, the agreement comes first. According to them, “peace agreements directly

focus on resolving a key controversy or conflict issue declared by the warring parties, either by resolving it in whole or in part, or by offering a clear process for its regulation” [source 10]. At the same time, the notion of a peace process is hardly prioritized, is defined too narrowly, covers only official negotiations and only those reached in state-based conflicts (conflicts where at least one of the parties is a state), and means little more than just a sequence of peace agreements that is counted only starting from the first agreement “on paper”. This is “a formal process in which the conflicting parties either decide to resolve the conflict through a sequence of agreements, each of which is devoted to only one of the key issues of confrontation, or conclude an agreement in continuation and development of previously signed peace agreements” [16, p. 623].

Against this background, there is a need not just to extend the criterion of focus on resolving key incompatibilities to the peace process as a whole and to reaffirm its significance for identifying such a process, but to go further.

First, it is necessary to make this criterion the most important and absolutely obligatory (*sine qua non*) condition for qualifying any negotiation process as a “peace process”. A peace process involves *efforts to end the armed conflict through dialogue (negotiations) on the key issues over which the armed confrontation is fought*. These issues go beyond purely military and/or humanitarian ones. Unlike various technical negotiations and truce agreements, the main essence of any peace process is not only and not so much a discussion of the forms and methods of warfare and its symptoms (including its humanitarian consequences), as it is a dialogue between the parties to the conflict on how to resolve the basic contradictions between them that actually led to the armed conflict. These key contradictions, or incompatibilities, always have a distinct political dimension, which can be socio-political, international political (geopolitical), related to political economy or political expression of ethnic, religious, regional, and/or any other identity, or their combination in any configuration.

Second, as noted above, it is necessary to start precisely from the peace process and not from a separate peace agreement which is already a product and at least an intermediate result of this process. A combination of this condition with the primacy of **criterion 1** has a specific methodological and practical meaning, making it possible to:

a) Separate peace processes from technical negotiations between the parties, including ceasefire talks;

b) Take into account a wider range of substantive negotiating initiatives and formats (the range of peace negotiations and initiatives that raise the key contradictions between the parties, involving them directly or held with their participation, is wider than a number of negotiation processes that lead to full-fledged peace agreements);

c) Solve the problem of identifying at least the beginning of a peace process. The start of negotiations on substantive issues – the key issues over which armed conflict is fought – is the beginning of the peace process.

Third, the very understanding of **criterion 1** should be brought more in line with the realities of contemporary conflict management. This mainly refers to relative decline in the number of comprehensive, complex peace agreements aimed at resolving the conflict as a whole (especially accords struck in intrastate conflicts, including agreements concluded within the framework of high-level international negotiation formats). This trend is observed against the background of a growing number of local agreements, ceasefires of varying degree of sustainability, etc. [sources 4, 8; 12]. It is also important to go beyond overly narrow interpretations of **criterion 1**: the fact that sustainable, comprehensive, “final” peace agreements are becoming less frequent at the present stage does not imply decrease in numbers, narrowing the spectrum, or marginalization of peace processes. On the contrary, it only further underscores the priority of a purposeful, meaningful process over a feverish “race for agreements” that are often premature, do not reflect the balance of power and realities on the battlefield, ignore or poorly address key issues at dispute, or are concluded mainly under the pressure of external actors and international mediators.

Fourth, the very wording “peace process” implies that it is difficult to expect that all basic contradictions between the conflict parties could be addressed and resolved by a single agreement or a set of agreements. Like any other process, a peace process consists of certain stages and has its own phases, which are not always clearly distinguishable, can overlap and develop in a non-linear manner. Even in substantive talks on the key contested issues, it is not possible to reach an agreement on all of them simultaneously or as part of one package (set) of agreements, especially over a relatively short period. The most acute and

complex issues (for example, the status of a particular territorial entity) are often postponed, moved to later stages of the peace process, in the hope that the conditions for a peaceful solution will improve, the settlement process will gain strength and momentum, mutual trust will arise or strengthen between the parties and the logic of peace will prevail.

Nevertheless, postponing the solution of some, especially the most fundamental issues of confrontation until some later stage must have its limits, because it also carries considerable risks. This is evidenced by a number of peace processes in conflicts ranging from the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Here are just a few of those risks.

- The conditions for a peace process (at the national, local-regional, and international levels) can change not only for the better but also for the worse, closing the “window of opportunity” that once opened for negotiations.

- Postponing the resolution of many or most of the key contradictions, especially for a long time, negatively affects the dynamics of the relationship between the negotiation process and armed violence. Each new, intermediate round of the resumption of the negotiation process partly reproduces the political dynamics preceding the conclusion of the initial agreement. This, among other things, re-creates the temptation for armed actors to improve their negotiating positions “at the last moment” through violence and facilitates attempts to blackmail or even undermine the negotiation process for its opponents, including through demonstrative acts of violence, especially terrorism.

- The later in a peace process a follow-up agreement fails, the more likely it will lead to the collapse of the entire process.

The point here is not to digress too much in the search for mutually acceptable solutions to key issues of confrontation. A peace process should maintain momentum and retain substance throughout its entire length, and a peace agreement must be of a fundamental rather than symbolic nature. Although the solution of certain individual issues can be postponed, the initial agreement should already be based on a compromise not just on a select issue, but on some “critical mass” of the core issues disputed by the parties.

A tendency on the part of one, both, or several sides of the confrontation to endlessly delay and postpone the solution of some key conflict incompatibilities

may indicate an *imitation* of a peace process. This brings one back to the fact that not every negotiation process between the parties amounts to something that could qualify as a “peace process”. At a certain stage, in the event of a constant lack of progress in resolving key contested issues, the peace process can degrade to the level of emasculated, routine technical contacts between the parties. As a result, they become nothing more than a background either for a temporary, sometimes protracted relative “freeze” of the conflict in the absence of its sustainable solution², or for periodic outbreaks and even recurrence of a full-scale armed confrontation.

Overall, the negotiation process that does not touch upon the key issues at dispute cannot be considered a full-fledged peace process. If, in the course of the negotiation process, the solution of most key issues or of the most fundamental ones is postponed for an indefinite period and an endless series of intermediate agreements, then this process already carries the recipe for its own collapse or more easily becomes an object of manipulation, including by acts of armed violence.

Criterion 2: negotiations between whom? The second most important criterion for defining a peace process is related to the range and line-up of its participants, or its inclusiveness. This problem has both a quantitative and a qualitative dimension.

In quantitative terms, in the context of a significant fragmentation of most modern conflicts, cases with one simple conflict (and negotiation) dyad, consisting of two well-organized and identifiable parties opposing each other, become increasingly rare. Instead, contexts that involve confrontation among several, and often many, armed actors, including those who dispute the same incompatibility, proliferate [10, pp. 34-35]. The armed forces of several and even many states at once can directly engage in the same conflict at once. As for non-state actors, the forces of armed opposition to the state can be so heterogeneous and fragmented that even the start of any meaningful peace process is sometimes unlikely or unpromising until a conflict becomes more structured and various armed groups consolidate, form coalitions, etc.

Against this background, the issue of qualitative composition of participants in negotiations between conflict parties also becomes acute. The question is whose involvement in talks is of fundamental

² In the first two decades of the 21st century, this was the form of most conflict outcomes (57%) (calculated by the author from [source 6]).

significance for resolving the key conflict incompatibilities (and this usually implies the most *militarily* active parties and groups “on the ground” who also enjoy some degree of social support) and without whom it is possible to proceed without causing much damage to the peace settlement.

There are three key points to consider in this regard.

First, the case in point are, first and foremost, direct armed participants in the conflict, i. e., its main parties and their direct representatives. Without involving representatives of the warring parties, any negotiations and discussions between international/external actors or domestic political actors who do not participate in hostilities (although often support one or another conflict party) or are not direct authorized political representatives of these parties³ do not yet make a peace process. This applies to such fairly common formats as, for example, various international contact groups, “groups of friends” of a country immersed in conflict, etc. Such negotiations and formats fall short of a peace process even when they include discussions on the main substantive issues (contradictions) of the armed confrontation.

This reservation also applies to cases where the inclusiveness of a peace process is incorrectly understood *mainly* as the role of structures and representatives of civil society [17] or is even reduced to this issue. Although the prevalence of this approach in the practice and literature on public diplomacy is understandable [6, 18], it only partly applies even to informal or semi-formal “track two” negotiations, let alone official “track one” negotiations. For all its liberality and humanistic message, this common approach (which has become a standard for many, especially Western, mediators and NGOs) is a misconception that distorts the real paramount task of ending armed violence, if, of course, this is the intended task.

The conclusion here is simple: no representatives of the conflict parties – no peace process (even if some negotiations are conducted by and between someone).

Second, a peace process, in its essence, should be conducted between the main opposing sides – the protagonists [14, p. 2], either directly or, especially in the early stages, through intermediaries authorized by these parties. This does not imply automatic inclusion in a peace process of each and every armed actor in

³ For instance, *Sinn Féin* Party for the Irish Republican Army.

a conflict area with whom any negotiations have ever taken place. Nor does this imply that the conflict parties (let alone international mediators) can “order” arbitrarily from the “menu” of the spectrum of armed actors, choosing only the weakest actors who are more convenient to negotiate with, including groups that split away from the main enemy forces (for instance, in the case of the government of Sudan negotiating initiatives on Darfur)⁴, or, for example, selecting only external actors – the patrons of the conflict parties – while refusing to engage in a meaningful dialogue with internal protagonists in a civil war (as was the case in the process of implementing the 2014–2015 Minsk agreements on Donbass)⁵. Such an approach usually does not lead to progress in ending the violence, and sometimes may even be counterproductive, and can lead to the resumption and even aggravation of armed confrontation. On the contrary, it is important to bring together precisely the main parties who contest a particular conflict incompatibility (or at least their representatives), following the principle “one does not choose one’s enemies and, hence, negotiation counterparts”.

A reservation is needed here about how strictly such negotiations should retain a dyadic character, that is, be limited to only one conflict dyad – a pair of armed parties opposing each other.

On the one hand, it is better to avoid overly strict limitations in this matter: it is not that each new participant in negotiations (each additional dyad) implies or requires the launch of a new peace process. It makes sense to consider, for example, the involvement of relatively large and militarily active groups contesting the same incompatibility (especially in the same region of the country) in peace negotiations as part of the same broader peace process, even if negotiations involving them follow parallel and not necessarily synchronized tracks.

On the other hand, limiting the number and composition of participants in peace negotiations to the main protagonists contesting a specific set of core issues is necessary for identifying the scope

⁴ Negotiations to resolve the conflict in Darfur (Sudan) have been ongoing since the mid-2000s to date (including the 2006 peace agreements in Abuja, the 2011 Doha agreement, and a series of agreements reached in 2019–2020 in Addis Ababa and Juba).

⁵ The Minsk Process (summer 2014 – February 2022) is the process of settlement of the conflict in the Donbass (southeast of Ukraine), which included the Minsk Protocol of September 5, 2014 (Minsk-1), the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements of February 11–12, 2015 (Minsk-2), as well as the process of their implementation that remained stalled for years and reached the deadlock.

(limits) and duration of a peace process as a process of management of the same conflict in which these issues are disputed and these armed actors take part. As soon as a qualitatively new major armed actor(s) who is not connected with the previous combatants and contests a different set of issues (even if it challenges the same state) enters the confrontation at any stage or after it fades away, this already implies a new case (conflict) in point and, accordingly, a new, different peace process, in case a negotiated solution is considered.

Third, the degree and limits of inclusiveness of a peace process are no less important, especially in view of fragmentation of violence and growing number of armed actors (mainly non-state actors) in conflicts in the first quarter of the 21st century (in Syria, Iraq, Libya, a long series of conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, etc.). In such conditions, distinguishing between the key protagonists as the main parties to negotiations and the rest of the armed actors (usually smaller and local or ultra-radical and, in principle, irreconcilable groups) becomes more and more relevant.

Of course, classifying certain armed actors as key actors (parties), without whom a negotiation process on a peaceful way out of the conflict loses its meaning and the right to be called a full-fledged peace process, is largely determined by the contextual conditions of a particular conflict. Nevertheless, a set of some general conditions and characteristics that such actors should meet is not a top secret. Among the most obvious of these characteristics is significant support for an armed group among the population of the conflict zone (as, for example, for the Hamas movement, the main Palestinian military-political force in the Gaza Strip, or for the armed fundamentalist movement Hezbollah that plays the role of the main political representative of the Shia, the largest community in Lebanon; both movements also hold respective electoral mandates). However, a no less, and sometimes an even more, important sign of a key actor that cannot be bypassed in a peace process without depriving this process of any serious prospects is if it has a sufficient, primarily military, potential to destabilize any negotiation process in which it is not involved. Both Middle Eastern movements mentioned above (as well as, for example, the Afghan Taliban movement) also fully meet this condition. However, smaller and more radical groups may also meet this criterion, regardless of the degree of their social support. Of course, the signs of key actors who should be involved in negotiations on ending the conflict through a peace process are not limited to these criteria – depending on the

context, they may also include other characteristics and conditions.

The fragmentation of armed violence and the non-linear nature of many (although not all) modern conflicts underscore the need to expand the range of potential participants in peace processes, primarily when it comes to non-state actors. In the context of unprecedented rise in violence by armed non-state actors, especially since the 2010s, as well as in the number and intensity of non-state conflicts [10, pp. 30-33], the definitions of a peace process and a peace agreement can be extended to include negotiations and agreements between major non-state combatants who are most significant in the military-political sense, and not just apply to a dialogue conducted with the participation of the state as at least one of the parties.

At the same time, the question of *local ceasefires* and related negotiations arises. Attempts to systematize data on such agreements are relatively recent: the specialized PA-Local database created in 2019 within the framework of PA-X recorded 332 local agreements for the period from 1990 to April 2022 [12, pp. 27-29, Table 1; source 11]. The agenda, activity, and composition of the participants in such agreements (negotiations) are geographically limited to a small territory only, sometimes reduced to one city or town, a group of villages, and an area under the control of a particular community, while the content of such talks is usually confined to issues that are mainly of a humanitarian nature and are related to basic life support, local truces, etc.

This problem can be solved by linking the first and second basic criteria for identifying a peace process considered in this study. If local truces are related to the main (ethnic, religious, socio-political) incompatibilities contested during the conflict, then regardless of the weight and size of their participants, they can be considered part of a broader peace process at its various stages. However, truces and related negotiations, not only at a local but also at a higher level, may also not be part of the peace process. For example, in cases when the goal of a local ceasefire is limited only to a temporary truce and other purely humanitarian or military aspects (in the absence of prospects and intentions for a further transition to a political settlement or in isolation from the political process), such a truce is too early to be considered as part of the peace process as such – there are simply not enough grounds for this.

Finally, sometimes the peace process *per se* becomes a means of crystallizing and stimulating

partial or significant political transformation of its main armed participants and helps to structure both the conflict itself and efforts to resolve it. This, for example, may take form of consolidation and merger of rebel structures for the sake of negotiations or building a coalition from a plethora of fragmented groups of the armed opposition (in conflicts ranging from the inter-Tajik conflict of the first half of the 1990s to the internationalized civil war in Syria in the 2010s).

CONCLUSION

Thus, a peace process is not an end in itself, for which all means are good and which must be achieved at any cost. It is the substance and nature of this process, its inclusiveness, and how much it is focused on resolving central issues and incompatibilities contested by the use of force that are of primary importance. This article postulates and proves, first, the priority of the qualitative characteristics of the peace process and qualitative analysis for its adequate definition, and second, the primacy of peace processes in relation to particular peace agreements, ceasefires, etc.

A peace process is not a subordinate category and not a technical derivative of the concept of “peace agreement”, as it is interpreted in most existing definitions and databases. A peace process is an effort to end an armed conflict through dialogue (negotiations) between representatives of the main conflicting parties on key issues over which an armed confrontation is being waged. Many negotiation processes related to armed conflicts and casually labeled or widely known as “peace processes” hardly meet even these two basic criteria, i. e. (a) focus on substantive negotiations on the most critical disputed incompatibilities and (b) are sufficiently inclusive to involve all armed actors, without whom the peaceful resolution of these contradictions is unlikely or pointless. Other possible criteria for defining a peace process – for example, a stable commitment of the parties to further resolve the contradictions between them through negotiations – are less relevant as they apply to only few such processes.

If a negotiation process, regardless of how it is called by its participants or anyone else, ignores the basic, critical issues contested by the parties to the conflict, misses most of them, postpones their resolution indefinitely, excludes or mistreats one or several armed actors who are the key parties to the conflict, then such a process either does not qualify for a “peace process”, in the first place, or at best carries the seeds of its own destruction and failure.

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