

CONFLICT BIAS AND VISION OF LIBERAL PEACE MANAGEMENT THROUGH MEDIATION

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In this paper I argue that people tend to overestimate conflicts and undervalue peace in social life, the tendency creates a risk of conflict escalation, which may be prevented if a mediator manages to help conflicting parties to discover deep peace behind apparent conflict and empower them to develop the peace. Also, I propose to use in the mediation visualization schemes, showing that peace and conflict may be confused with one another, to explain to participants that they have a choice between peace and conflict and their way of thinking determines the outcome of mediation. Research presented here is related to my master's project conducted during the Master's Program in Mediation and Conflict Management at KROK Business School, which is part of the project "Mediation: Training and Society Transformation/ MEDIATS" co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

My starting point is a critical approach to a widespread understanding of conflict as a usual, inevitable, and even necessary form of social dynamics. Fisher et al. (2000) put it as follows: "Conflicts are a fact of life, inevitable and often creative. Conflicts happen when people pursue goals which clash... If it is clear that conflict is with us whether we like it or not, it is only another step to seeing that we actually need it. There is much literature, in the business world especially, which focuses on the beneficial effects of conflict." Since a clash is a violent confrontation by definition, and violence is harmful behavior, the idea of inevitability and necessity of conflict implies that people have no choice but to pursue harmful goals somehow benefitting from it. If the actor benefits from some behavior, it can't be considered harmful unless it hurts others; therefore, the implication of the idea of benefitting from conflict is to hurt others pursuing benefits to ourselves. To check whether such an idea is moral, we should ask if it complies with the Golden Rule of treating others as you want to be treated, in other (Kantian) words – can this idea become a universal law? If all people will hurt others for benefit of themselves, they will constantly take harm from others with no benefits for themselves, and this foreseeable outcome contradicts their final goal to take benefit at cost of harm to others. So, the idea of benefitting from a conflict in principle is immoral.

Thinking why people choose to follow the immoral idea, I formulated the next hypothesis of "conflict bias": where it exists possible or current peace (alone or along with conflict), we tend to see only emotionally engaging conflict, which results in a short-term escalation of conflict and long-term focus of our experience on conflict. I found historical and empirical evidence to prove this hypothesis.

Historical evidence of the conflict bias hypothesis is that the 20th century was remembered as the epoch of world wars of 1914-1919 and 1939-1945, despite these wars took only 10¼ years of 100, many nations didn't participate in it, and in the same century, United Nations were established, introduced legal prohibition of aggressive war, and declared the human right to peace.

Empirical evidence of the conflict bias hypothesis is a public perception of the scheme with two arrows pointing at each other as collision rather than as convergence. I asked in several online communities via Facebook and Telegram in their preferred languages (English, Ukrainian, and Russian), whether they see on the scheme peace or conflict. In all cases “conflict” option got a prevailing majority of votes, despite the proportion was different across the communities (94% for conflict between Anglophones, 71% between Ukrainophones, and 73% between Russophones). Also, I conducted similar research adding two more options into the poll (peace and conflict; nothing), that turned alternative to conflict options into the majority. Interestingly, in a poll among the mediators, 57% of votes received an option “I see both peace and conflict” (Sheliazhenko, 2020).

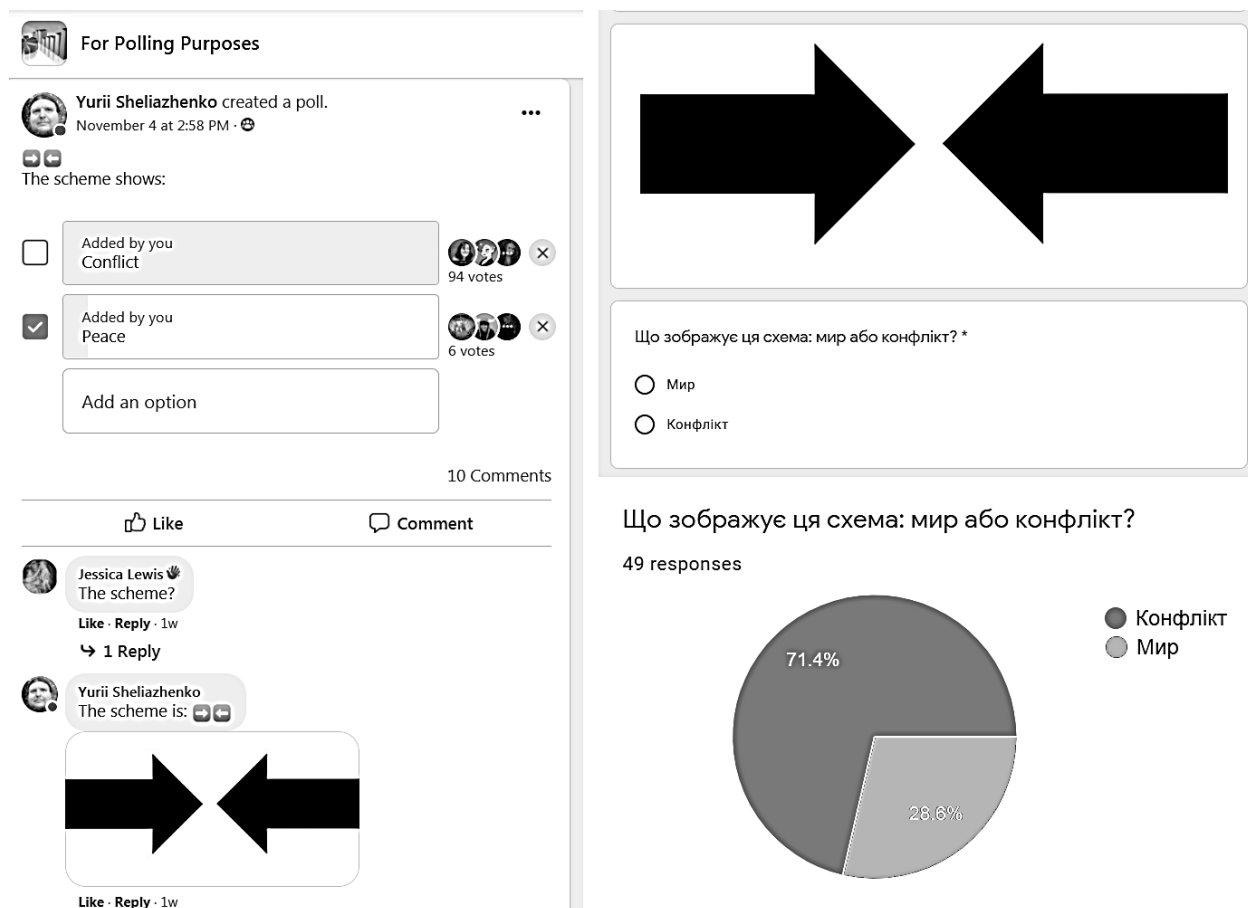


Fig. 1. Results of the “conflict bias hypothesis” poll

My successful experiment with adding more options into the poll to overcome conflict bias was based on a liberal approach.

Lehti (2019) describes liberal peace as the idea combining democracy promotion, respect of human rights and peace, which became a cornerstone of new international order, and emphasizes the centrality of private peacemakers “as flexible actors whose

innovative thinking paves the way for reconsidering and reinventing old practices of mediation.” He mentions academic criticism of “the myth of rational management of a peace process” as “conflict management” based on linear causal logic (as I understand, it is related to the notorious “divide and rule” approach prevailing in public politics) which is less effective than “adaptive approach” initiated by private actors, for example, in liberal peace interventions, civil crisis management and humanitarian aid projects of NGOs.

Private peacemaker, such as a mediator (i.e. professional organizer of the process of achieving agreements and cohesion between people), can show people they have a choice between peace and conflict exposing their conflict bias. In this vision, mediation should be an inherently liberal process of peace management.

References:

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