

VILNIUS DECLARATION ON DEALING WITH CONSEQUENCES OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

The participants of the Conference “Dealing with the Trauma of an Undigested Past”, having gathered in Vilnius on the eve of the 30th Anniversary of Restoration of Lithuania’s Independence

Conclude that:

- Collective traumas are crucial and impactful human experiences that significantly affect domestic politics and international relations. Traumas influence how societies view themselves and how they form domestic and international policies.
- Societies experience collective traumas regardless of the epoch or geography. Worldwide we still see the consequences of collective traumas resulting from natural disasters, colonialism, slavery, racism, genocide, ethnic and religious conflicts, international and civil wars, political persecution, the Holocaust, crimes of totalitarian regimes and terrorism.
- The way collective trauma is dealt with varies from country to country. At the same time, collective traumas are better understood from international context. Although each collective trauma is unique, it is important to learn from each other and share methods and lessons in overcoming them.
- The recognition of historical traumas, acknowledgement of their impact and work on dealing with the past is the path towards reconciliation within the society, as well as between people and nations, which lays the groundwork for their current and future relationships. An open and honest dialogue and joint reflection is essential to the foundation for peaceful and democratic societies based on the rule of law and recognition of the universal human rights.

Emphasize that:

- The consequences of collective traumas have varying impacts on different societies. The question is not only how to avoid traumas in the future but also how to deal with the traumatizing past in a such a way that it no longer dominates the present and negatively influences the future development of society.

- Collective trauma affects not only the particular victims and their perpetrators, but also society as a whole and its relations with other communities: it erodes societal fabric, has the tendency to transmit from generation to generation and hinders societal well-being.

- In particular, historical trauma can have negative effects on cultural and national identity and self-esteem. Human beings have a need to feel good about the group to which they belong. War trauma, humiliation, defeat, or subjugation negatively affects the collective self-respect and can influence the way individuals view or value their own cultures.

- Historical trauma impacts large groups of people and the traumatic events becomes part of their collective narrative and identity. Those who survive are focused on staying alive; they cannot take the time to fully grieve their losses. Once the trauma is over, the focus turns toward building a new life, and the trauma again is forced into hiding because its impact is so overwhelming and painful.

- Societies who continue to struggle to deal with the past traumatic experiences may suffer a wide range of trans-generational consequences, such as increased prevalence of mental health problems, violence in families, communities and other settings, and other problems related to the destructive societal dynamics, including a critical lack of authentic faith, trust and self-esteem.

- Through the acceptance that collective trauma will never disappear and that one has a permanent relationship with it, the inheritor can be liberated from a tortured denial or rejection of its existence. Digesting the traumatic past provides an outlet for constrained and unexpressed emotional energy.

- Descendants of victims, survivors and perpetrators grieving together, and giving each other permission to grieve, is an essential part of healing historical wounds. People carry their ancestors’ pain, and until that pain is fully grieved this legacy continues to be passed on to the next generation.

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- In dealing with the painful past, a society gains resilience, promotes societal healing and develops the necessary resources and wisdom that will help avoid future destructive societal developments. A society that is striving to heal needs to try to make sense of the traumatizing experience and integrate it into a complex cultural identity.

- During the post-World War II era, there has been a shift in international norms towards legal accountability and truth seeking. Transitional justice is a developing international norm, which provides the environment where societies can address their traumatic past by pursuing justice and telling the truth about the past. Governments and international organizations should encourage and facilitate efforts supporting this process.

Encourage:

Governments and International Organizations:

1 Fully recognize and research **what happened exactly**, who was involved and in what way. Support the work of scholars, nonprofit organizations, truth commissions and war crime tribunals in presenting the concrete and researched evidence about the terrible crimes. Provide both moral and material support to the ongoing historical investigation into totalitarian regimes, as only by acting in a concerted manner can we more effectively counter disinformation campaigns and attempts to manipulate historical facts and the creation of new falsified narratives. Make sure that all corresponding historical documents (i.e. archives) are accessible for research purposes.

2 Assure that **justice is done**, as restoration of justice facilitates post-trauma healing and the well-being of those affected. Seek truth, accountability, and reparations. Enable reparations for material and immaterial losses to victims and survivors of human rights abuses, especially to those who are identified as most vulnerable (women, children, minority groups and impoverished communities). Assure help to those affected and identify how to provide this help in the best possible way. Develop strategies for preventive efforts to break the cycle of trauma and trans-generational transmission.

3 Acknowledge the losses of those directly affected, e.g. lack of educational and career opportunities as a result of individual trauma, and support their ways out of social isolation.

4 Work with academics to improve the quality and quantity of **international** research about collective traumas. Investigate the methods used in other societies which helped them heal collective traumas.

5 Motivate and facilitate appropriate reflection through **multidisciplinary** research resulting in publications of different formats, both scientific and popular, including collections of testimonies of those involved in traumatic events, both in writing and audio-visually.

6 Promote **artistic** reflection of the traumatic experiences as a powerful tool of exteriorizing and symbolizing pain, facilitating the truth seeking and healing processes.

7 Provide effective support for **projects of historical memory and remembrance**. Develop adequate memorization programs, such as: remembrance days, victim memorials, public recognition of those who behaved themselves exemplarily, museums and works of art dedicated to those events, etc.

8 Deal with the continued existence in public spaces of monuments and memorials (parks, squares, streets etc.) glorifying the perpetrators of collective traumas. Search for a balanced and lasting solution based on expertise and public dialogue.

9 Develop **educational programs and curricula** for primary and secondary educational institutions in order to promote next-generation awareness and sensitivity.

10 Mobilize like-minded countries to make an effort to integrate traumatic experiences into a universally understood narrative free from political manipulation and selective stressing of certain historical events. Withhold from using history as an instrument in the political campaigns and information wars trying to exploit the past for today's political struggles.

11 Take appropriate measures to counteract the efforts to distort historical facts and whitewash crimes committed by the totalitarian regimes. Involve the international community in helping societies who struggle with a proper evaluation and holistic digestion of the past, provide support in overcoming its destructive consequences, and assure democratic developments. Encourage international dialogue related to the difficult issues of the contested past, seek mutual understanding and reconciliation between the states.

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Mental health professionals:

12 Seek a role in developing strategies to break the trans-generational transmissions of trauma and their malignant consequences. Besides being healers of traumatized individuals, look for ways to help administer preventive medicine to societies recovering from collective traumas.

13 Work more closely with local NGO's, indigenous (mental) health professionals and other stakeholders in the countries. Provide them with means and knowledge to deal with traumas, but also learn and draw upon local cultural traditions of dealing with collective trauma.

Adopted in Vilnius on 6 March 2020