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Speech

Many of you, I am sure, will remember an initiative made by Dr Bernard Kouchner, later the French Foreign Minister, as he was founding a new international organization called Medecins Sans Frontiers – or Doctors Without Borders. An admirable organization, which has even won the Nobel Peace Prize.

A few weeks ago, another non-governmental organization by the name of Historians Without Borders was founded – this time here in Finland. This NGO was not conceived for academic purposes only, although respect for academic strict standards is one of its goals. The purpose is to bring together historians from various corners of the world to discuss international conflicts and make historians available whenever historical depth is needed in the settlement of conflicts. As we all know, most conflicts have their historical roots. Sometimes one has the feeling that serious disagreements on historical facts and – in particular – narratives are an essential part of conflicts and they make their resolution more difficult.

“Everyone is entitled to his opinions but not to his own facts” is one of the many bon-mots attributed to the American senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. That sounds fair enough. On closer examination, however, what sounds perfectly sensible is a serious problem. *“One’s own facts”* is often – as narratives differ – the root problem. What is a fact, is – in a highly political situation – not very different from what is an opinion. Your facts may be acceptable as facts, but not necessarily relevant from my point of view. My facts may be indisputable, but there are also other facts contradicting what I say.

In serious political crisis situations, narratives are very much at the epicentre of the dialogue – a word which may be much too neutral to describe the nature of the exchange of views.

As we know, the norms on how history is written vary greatly from one political culture to another. There are countries where school books, for instance, are fully standardized, where there is room for only a sacrosanct narrative. And there are other political cultures where a diversity of narratives is an important part of training students to engage in critical thinking.

“People never lie as much as before an election, during the war or after the hunt” is something that Prince Otto von Bismarck has stated. As we know so well, the truth is indeed the first victim of all wars. In such situations, the narratives are weaponized, the history becomes a hatchet and the truth is – at best – relativized. It may be so that there is very little that can be done during a conflict situation about these things. But after the hostilities, when the parties are in search of a settlement of their differences, it is time to bring the narratives closer to one another. This is when Historians Without Borders can make a contribution.

“It’s not what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so” said the famous American humourist Will Rogers. Yes, indeed, “it ain’t so” is often the right approach. People remember, indeed they believe they know for sure, many such things that simply are not true. They remember because they have been taught from their childhood that Christian narrative is the truth and the Muslim one is all wrong – or vice versa. Myths are often cherished and used as arguments to score political points or to justify acts that in themselves have little to do with the myths recalled.

Many European countries that have had in their history a highly adversarial relationship with their neighbours have made efforts to come closer in their narratives concerning their past. Such commissions have varying names – “difficult issues” on Polish and Russian historical traumas, for instance, or “truth commissions” have been founded. Their task is not only academic, although that is an aspect not to be ignored – old myths are not to be replaced with new myths. It is, however, not enough that those who work as professionals with such difficult issues become better informed. The problem is much more often that the general public has been indoctrinated into believing things that are untrue or greatly coloured for political purposes. Such beliefs are often part of what has been learned through school books and teaching at an early age.

If we think about the crisis of these days, be it between Shias or Sunnis, Catholics or Protestants, between various groups in the Ukraine, and even in the case of political tensions between the Americans and Russians, in all these cases there are beliefs and dogmas that influence our thinking. To lower the barrier between those in a conflict situation, progress towards accepting common facts would be a great step forward.

I have had the privilege of having participated in the early beginnings of the OSCE process – at a time when we were still assessing the possibilities of convening something that later emerged as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. That was, from the very beginning, strictly an intergovernmental phenomenon. It is true that in many countries the legislative branch of the government did take an interest in the process, but their influence in the early phases was limited. The negotiations in Geneva were affairs between professionals. Professionals who knew their history – and also the narratives of their counterparts. There was no need for arm-twisting over what was the truth on this or that issue – such conflicts could be side-tracked. Little need to play to the gallery. That was a great help.

Today, forty years later, as I speak to you as a private citizen, accountable only to my maker, I can share with you some thoughts of my own, even on subjects I would never had dared to raise when in office.

I am well aware of the bad reputation of secret diplomacy and negotiations behind closed doors. In many international organizations, there is much demand for open negotiations, for uninhibited press coverage. In the name of democracy and open government, such claims are easy to understand. That is one side of the coin.

There is, however, also another side to that coin. All true professionals know that in diplomatic negotiations there are often situations where it is common sense to play with one’s cards very

close to one's chest. Negotiations are often about bargaining. Who would start with one's best offer? But that is what one has to do if total openness is the required form. So what happens in those open negotiations, open to the media and to the general public?

The more public negotiations are, the less they are of the real substance is public – or open. Everything of real meaning takes place outside the official meetings. And yet – there is the illusion that real results can be achieved in open meetings. That is nonsense. Negotiations behind closed doors are a necessary vehicle in the settlement of serious open issues. To make them public would be not only counterproductive, but dishonest. Dishonest, because whatever governments say, they are still settling their differences without the surveillance of the media.

But then, must everything be secret or secretive? Of course not. In most cases, the overall goals of negotiations are on public record. Political leaders state the overall objectives in broad terms, they may even say something about their strategic ambitions. That is one side of negotiations. The other side is the tactics, the bargaining, the search for mutually acceptable outcomes.

We all know that if the topic of a certain negotiation process is interesting enough, or important enough, all conceivable efforts are made to influence the negotiators. Rumours, targeted leaks, half-truths – the list is long. With new media, often called social media, we have reached an entirely different world. There are no editors to take responsibility for what is published. We don't even know whose texts we are reading or how real are the pictures we see. There is an entire make-believe world in the media, much of it designed to mislead and to confuse. Much of that is done by governments or with their blessings. A new way of waging war, one could say.

What kind of countermeasures can be taken? It is no good to confront a lie with another lie. Much better to beat lies with truths. But who knows what is true?

Here I would like to return to where I began. Most political developments have their roots in history. There are narratives, invented or genuine, of what has happened. Those who know their history, both sides of the coin, are not easily fooled. It was no lesser a person than Abraham Lincoln who said: "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time."

The goal, then, is to make that fooling as difficult as possible. By knowing more about the backgrounds, more about the facts, relative to the case at hand.

International gatherings, such as this one, are an open avenue for the exchange of views, acquainting oneself with the views of our counterparts face to face – without the background noise of propaganda and all that nonsense that is an unfortunate part of modern communication where – only too often – *the medium* is the *message*, as Marshall McLuhan put it some fifty years ago.

Most people find it difficult to lie face to face. Decent people trust one another. But trust can only be created by a certain degree of intimacy. Diplomatic communication – at its best – is a contact sport – not necessary physically but intellectually. The ugliest among contact sports I ever heard of

is mud-wrestling. Too often even governments engage themselves in mudslinging and badmouthing. It may take a long time to wash off such mud. Smart negotiators therefore avoid that sort of contact sport. It is much easier to initiate a war – even a war of words – than to restore peace.

One of the many things I remember from the early phases of the CSCE process is how decent the negotiators were – regardless of how profound their differences were. Many friendships were forged across ideological barriers and even some marriages were registered. Whenever people have a common project and it is in their interest to finish that project successfully then they are likely to behave – to avoid unnecessary confrontations and to try to find amicable ways for settling their differences. That is much easier if they can agree on which are the facts that have a bearing upon their common task. Their narratives may differ even after the agreement. But then such an outcome is not based on ignorance, but on their values and their targets. It is all right to respectfully disagree – that can be a good beginning to a more successful round, ending in agreement.

There was a CSCE summit in Helsinki in July 1992. Dr Mauno Koivisto, a veteran of the Second World War, was at that time our President. He ended his speech to the conference with the following message:

“We have before us the most difficult task of all possible tasks; we have undertaken to make the world more safe, and to master our political, economic, social and religious differences in a human way. It is of fundamental importance that we can place our trust in one another and in our institutions.”

Thank you for your attention.