



2009 The UN International Year
of Reconciliation: Essay on the
Synergy Effect between Politics
and Mass Media

Seung-hoon Heo*

Slovakia and Hungary, both EU members since 1994, have enjoyed considerable economic and political developments within a regional cooperation framework. Yet, the Slovak gesture to stop the Hungarian president from entering their territory in August 2009 demonstrates the current popular mood within the Slovak societies against the Hungarians. This diplomatic incident tells us well to what extent politicians playing their nationalistic card to spur popular hatred obstructs societal reconciliation between former enemies. Since the hardline Slovak National Party (SNS) joined the ruling coalition government in 2006, inflammatory attacks on Hungarians are frequently observed, which is often fueled with racial tone. According to a Slovak Public Opinion Survey, SNS and Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) regularly politicized questions about Hungarian irredentism and minority issues in order to mobilize public support. As far as extreme-nationalist elements are represented in the country's government, the chance for progress toward a genuine reconciliation remains dim.

Bearing in mind the seemingly contradictory forces of a growing tendency toward interstate reconciliation and rising nationalism, this paper seeks to explore the role of two central actors - political elites and media professionals - in promoting a culture of reconciliation between hereditary enemies.

The Franco-German couple, praised as the best example of international reconciliation, did not experience less violence in propagating hostile image contributing to the mythology surrounding the Franco-German hereditary enmity. To face the national humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, the mobilization or manipulation of the French public opinion against "barbarian" Germany became the primary objective of French politicians. In parallel, German politicians utilized racial arguments to nurture national antagonism against France. It was only after the end of the Second World War that France and Germany seriously understood the danger of national enmity and agreed on initiating comprehensive reconciliation policies.

The temptation to control public opinion for political ambition is certainly not easy to resist. Therefore, political leaders' efforts to refrain themselves from manipulating public opinion for the sake of a nation's destiny will be highly



N°4 | June 2010

appreciated by their people in a longer term. They are encouraged to maintain a forward-looking perspective by viewing its nation's future from a broader regional angle. Politicians should be aware of the fact that extreme nationalist or racial arguments are nothing more than placing further insurmountable obstacles to harmonious relations. To overcome emotionally strident nationalism, it is indispensable for one to learn how to listen to each other. It does not necessarily mean that one must agree on all controversial issues. The willingness to understand the other's position through a new positive prism represents already a huge step forward in strained reconciliation process.

The ambivalent relationship between South Korea and Japan, erstwhile enemies for more than a half century, gives a telling example of state to people reconciliation. Despite their diplomatic normalization and a strong economic interdependence, political elites' accusations on sensitive historical issues related to the Japanese colonization upon the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945 are still common today, which has a considerable influence on shaping the public opinion. Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama's apology statement in 1995 on the occasion of the fifties anniversary of the end of the Second World War was therefore highly appreciated by a larger public and perceived as a sincere political expression to renew bilateral relationship. From the South Korean part, it is of particular importance that the leading Grand National Party (GNP) and the opposing Democratic Party (DP) jointly launched a campaign for "Refining Political Language" in April 2010. According to a survey conducted by the Korean Parliament in December 2009, the majority of politicians agreed upon the urgent need for "purifying" their language in order to create a new political culture of dialogue and respect. The report says: "Language is the most crucial means for political elites to communicate their conviction as well as their commitment with the public. Emotionally aggressive rhetoric only aggravates the popular perception on political affairs. It is thus our duty to take the initiative to regain public trust." A monitoring system is installed by the Korean Political Communication Association (PCA) to observe any progress made by analyzing public speeches through mass media and language used during the Parliamentary sessions over the year.

In this sense, communication channels have primary importance in creating a new perspective toward each other. If the written press strongly influenced the public opinion in the past, it is the audiovisual media such as television, internet, and movies that has a tremendous impact on the public awareness in a large scale. In Poland's relation with Russia, for instance, Cheremushkin argues that the role of mass cultural exchange was significant in promoting Russian-Polish reconciliation as it helped each country view the other in a positive way. Nevertheless, the Polish television coverage of current affairs still builds a consistent negative picture of Russia, which hardens a stereotyped enemy image on their historical enemy. The political discourse of the mass media tends to downplay the Poland's record of



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°4 | June 2010

aggressiveness toward its neighboring countries whereas any sensitive military decision made by Moscow is viewed as a political threat against Warsaw.

Media and politics are like two sides of a coin. State actors know that a full support from the public opinion and mass media is the primary factor in foreign policy shaping. Therefore, media professionals should be aware of the fact that manipulating certain historical events or amplifying only the negative aspects of current sensitive issues does nothing but harm to the future directions of reconciliation. While remaining objective, they are encouraged to pay closer attention to what might initially appear to be negligible changes in the round of events. The UN resolution on the Year of Reconciliation 2009 highlights the crucial importance of "the role of media in reporting on reconciliation processes." By giving an example of the abuse of the Venezuelan press on public opinion, the representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela argued during the preparation of the draft resolution that the misuse of media represents "the greatest threat to (...) reconciliation." If information dealing with positive changes occurring in enemy states becomes accessible to the public, people will learn to hold a balanced view on the past and can even contribute with constructive critiques to the unresolved issues. Hinson, the winner of the top documentary prize at the Student Academy Award for "As We Forgive" in 2008, took the risk to deal with reconciliation in producing a documentary film in order to show how victims and attackers learned to live together after a traumatic past. She commented afterwards that she thinks reconciliation is "one of the most challenging subjects anyone can face."

The role of politicians and media professionals in minimizing the discrepancy between state and popular approach toward reconciliation is of high importance to be explored. As a matter of fact, political parties and media are often regarded as main sources of distorting public opinion and manipulating historical past for their own sake. But, what if the reverse happens? If journalists and politicians work together to value positive, even small, signs of change toward reconciliation, would that approach help promoting a culture of reconciliation at a large scale? This is rather a provocative new way of thinking. It means to create a culture of peace between historical enemies that destroys, to a certain extent, the barrier between "us" and "others" in their perception and political practices. Joseph, a specialist on the Turkish-Greek reconciliation on Cyprus, argued during a private interview in 2005 that international reconciliation indeed means "both can live together, interact, and look at each other as citizens of the same country without placing too much emphasis on what divides them, but rather what unites them." His expression of 'citizens of the same country' may sound excessive to be applied onto the real world. In a less rigorous term, reconciled people may refer to an amicable relationship in which both people do not treat others anymore based on the stereotyped enemy image but show instead positive interests toward each other both on the politico-diplomatic and socio-cultural levels. As Marks puts it rightly in the *Power of the Media*, "the media's influence alone is



N°4 | June 2010

insufficient to produce the changes necessary for a society's reconciliation. Media initiatives must work closely with other actors and initiatives, must be timed appropriately, and must demonstrate patience and longevity." In sum, the synergy effect between politicians and media can be high in creating a culture of reconciliation.

This reflection is timely because our society today faces the challenge of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. As a matter of fact, a stereotyped image on races, cultures, and religions constitutes the core element in haunting reconciliation since without destroying the barrier between "us" and "others," there can be no genuine reconciliation. Even after advances in politico-diplomatic normalization and any further economic cooperation driven by states, distrustful public mood can still remain strong if there is any discriminatory social atmosphere, visible or invisible, on religious or ethnic minorities. Ethnocentric or mono-religious nationalism can be a serious obstacle to reconciliation. Identity construction itself is certainly not a bad thing. It only becomes dangerous when emotional nationalism is intolerable to cultural or ethnic diversity. It becomes even more dangerous when it turns out to be aggressive against others by putting only its own national identity superior to all others.

German nationalism after the end of the Second World War was partly absorbed within the European community which is slowly evolving as a new foreign policy framework for all its members. However, this is not the case for Japan, a highly ethnocentric society, whose nationalism is so closely linked to the unresolved recent history with neighboring states. This is much the same in South Korea, "a country where until recently people were taught to take pride in their nation's 'ethnic homogeneity'" according to Korean Times. It was partially the repeated invasions and subjugations by China and Japan that nurtured "pure-blood" nationalism among South Koreans. However, their distorted racial perception constitutes a serious obstacle to pursuing reconciliatory politics with their neighboring states as cultural or racial offenses are on rise today. It is still common to hear South Korean using pejorative slang when they talk about Japanese or Chinese people while "twigi"-children who do not have 'pure Korean blood'- face more and more a discriminatory treatment in their everyday life. The dual aspect of emotional nationalism and bilateral reconciliation is crucial because.

Switzerland is commonly referred as the best example of a multi-cultural, multi-confessional, and multi-lingual nation. Yet, it was not a given fact. "Switzerland was founded on diversity despite its diversity," is how Chiara Simoneschi-Cortesi, President of the National Council of Switzerland, expressed the importance of laborious, sometimes painful, processes Swiss people had to go through in order to "enjoy" its diversity. Applied to inter-state level, some say that European countries were "lucky" to have a relatively common civilization. It is true that coincidentally



N°4 | June 2010

or not, successful cases of reconciliation are all European, namely Franco-German, Anglo-French, and Polish-German reconciliations. Certain take Christianity as the basic element for the success of European reconciliations arguing that Christian heritage has some impact, if not crucial, in dealing with enmity perception since it has the notion of forgiveness, apology, reconciliation, confession, and unity. However, they overlook the fact that Christian heritage including Anglicans, Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox was also the cause for brutal inter-confessional conflicts. European history of Religion was not less violent than any other region around the world. It is to note that arduous efforts on spiritual reconciliations have been made and are still been making among different Christian affiliations as well. It took, for instance, decades to agree on the Augsburg treaty in the late 1990s, the marking point of reconciliation between Catholic and Protestant churches.

Reconciliation is an open expression of political will. It not only asks for revising the concept of enemy in international relations but also demands for overcoming the spirit of exclusion, which is at the very centre of the concept of state. In this sense, those who exercise great political power should be fully aware of their public responsibility since they are in a leading position to create incentives for reconciliation, which fosters changing behaviors of civil society. US President Barack Obama in his inaugural speech in January 2009 emphasized the importance of "unity of purpose over conflict and discord" by arguing that the politics of integration, of reconciliation, and of harmony is a modern form of politics today. It is a choice of pragmatism. In this sense, the vicious circle of the everlasting accusations toward each other can only stop if both sides show mutual political will to promote a constructive dialogue and assume concrete commitments by the implementation of a coherent policy.

Once again, it is of particular interest that the United Nations has proclaimed 2009 as "the Year of Reconciliation." If multilateralism created an international trend for cooperation between nation-states, it also pushed them to face the danger of spurring nationalism resulting from cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. As a "process which leads to the recognition of the Other in their differences," reconciliation practice would help "establish a new type of relationship between states as well as the promotion of a new culture that will ensure the irreversibility of peace." The European Commission slogan, "Unity in Diversity" is a concrete example of a creation of identity based, not on homogeneous but shared values through conscious efforts from both sides.

A "spirit of reconciliation" or a "culture of reconciliation" cannot be created over night. It is a long-run process to learn how to rebuild broken relationship, which requires a resolute determination and strong willingness to learn about others. Yet, it will be too late to start learning how to work together once some regional or global threats become imminent. Certainly, there will always be something to fight



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

Nº4 | June 2010

over as the Good and the Bad exist at the same time. However, it would be wiser to spend time and make efforts in finding out what unites than what divides. Reconciliation is thus a conscious process that needs exercise like the art of war requires. Whether cultural, ethnic and religious diversity is a source of eternal conflict or a richness of humanity relies on us.

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N°4 | June 2010

*PhD
Graduate Institute of International
and Development Studies, Geneva