Trustbuilding and Democratization. Workshop by Ieva Rūkė

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Slide 1 — Title / Welcome (1:00)

Hello — I'm Ieva Rūkė from the Center for Dialogue and Conflict Transformation at LCC International University, Lithuania. Thank you for being here. Today we will look at how trustbuilding and democratization can emerge when institutions and civil society are linked — using the Lithuanian experience as a case. I'll speak for about twenty-five minutes, then we'll have time for questions and group work.

Slide 2 — Workshop Roadmap (3:00)

Before we dive into the examples, let me briefly show you how today's workshop will flow and what story line connects it all.

We'll spend the first part — about twenty-five minutes — exploring how trust develops between institutions and civil society. After that, we'll open ten minutes for questions or short comments so we can clarify ideas together. Then we'll move into smaller groups for about twenty-five minutes to share experiences from your own contexts — where you've seen cooperation or tension between institutions and citizens. And finally, we'll close with a fifteen-minute reflection to gather what we've learned and what insights might travel across contexts.

Now, the content of my presentation also follows a kind of roadmap — a cycle many post-authoritarian and post-conflict societies go through. It moves from Hardening → Resistance → Reconciliation → Transformation.

Hardening is the moment when institutions become rigid or closed and public distrust deepens. Resistance is when civic energy rises and people organize outside formal politics. Reconciliation begins once both sides start cooperating, however cautiously. And Transformation is when that cooperation matures into shared responsibility and stronger democracy.

This cycle is not strictly linear — sometimes we move forward and back — but it helps us see how trustbuilding actually unfolds over time. We'll walk through these stages using Lithuania's experience after regaining independence as our main thread, while connecting it to broader lessons for democratization and peacebuilding.

Slide 3 — Why Trustbuilding Matters (2:00)

Why focus on trust? Because democratic institutions depend on citizen confidence. When trust collapses, people disengage: they stop voting, stop participating, and democracy becomes fragile. Civil

society acts as the bridge — sometimes as watchdogs who push for accountability, sometimes as partners who deliver services and co-create solutions. And very often it is dificult to distinguish which position and NGO should choose in what case. When do we advocate? Protest? How far do we push for change? And when do we step in to assist in changemaking? Both roles matter. Research on Lithuania shows that rebuilding trust requires both critical voice and constructive cooperation.

Slide 4 — Hardening (4:00)

First stage: Hardening. After the fall of communism, Lithuania had to recreate institutions nearly from zero. At the same time, habits formed under the old system — secrecy, patronage, informal networks — did not disappear overnight. What happened in many places, including here, was that institutions 'hardened' — they became formal on paper but non-transparent in practice. Decision-making concentrated in elite circles; oversight mechanisms were weak; and everyday citizens felt excluded from meaningful participation.

A good example of this is the police forces. Although the soviet "milice" institution was demolished, all the same officers moved into independent, democratic police forces. In the 90s, police in Lithuania were so extremely corrupt that there was almost no way to deal with massive organized crime. You could have your car blown up in the middle of the day, and no one would be held accountable for it.

This hardening shows in lived experience: slow or non-transparent public procurement, uneven rule enforcement, and a perception that political decisions served insiders. For citizens, democratic promises felt hollow. Instead of feeling empowered, many felt disappointed or simply cynical.

That cynicism matters: when people assume the system is rigged, they withdraw. That withdrawal deepens the problem — fewer citizens checking power, fewer volunteers, less civic energy — a negative feedback loop that can ultimately grow into polarization, which then could lead to violent uprisings. That is the core of hardening as we use the term in this workshop.

Slide 5 — Encouragement of Hardening (4:00)

Second stage: Encouragement. For the purpose of our conversation today I define encouragement as factors that reinforced distrust and cynicism toward institutions, such as political scandals, weak oversight, and narratives portraying all politicians or institutions as corrupt.

In Lithuania, several high-profile incidents reinforced public beliefs that institutions were untrustworthy. For example, in the 1990s, corruption cases involving senior officials confirmed for many citizens that politics could be a path to personal gain. In 1993, the Pakaunė standoff showed tensions within security structures and suggested fragility inside the state. If you ask me, I think that this particular incident was extremely dangerous since it could have led to a full-scale military coup. Later, in 2004, the impeachment of President Rolandas Paksas dramatized the idea that questionable ties between politicians and business could reach the highest offices. Rolandas Paksas was the first

Lithuanian president to be impeached.

Each scandal did two things: it damaged the individuals involved, and it fed a broader narrative — that power was self-serving and accountability weak. Media coverage and slow reform turned isolated events into collective stories: 'politicians cannot be trusted.'

This is the danger of 'encouragement': isolated failures become collective stories that cement distrust. Once that story is widespread, it is far harder to re-establish confidence.

Slide 6 — Resistance (5:00)

Third stage: Resistance. Resistance in this context is civic energy converting into organized action. When citizens lose trust in formal politics, they often build alternatives — NGOs, grassroots groups, community networks — to solve problems themselves and to demand accountability. And remember that civil society in the Soviet times was almost always limited to labor unions. I will go as far as to say that Lithuania in the 90s had to build civil society from scratch.

In Lithuania we saw a remarkable growth of civil society in the 2000s. Registered NGOs multiplied rapidly: thousands of groups emerged to address social needs, human rights, community development, and cultural life. That increase represented citizens finding practical ways to act when the political system disappointed them.

Several kinds of resistance are important to highlight. The Rural Community Movement — primarily women-led groups — tackled post-socialist challenges: broken services, depopulation, and rural poverty. The Lithuanian Gay League, established in 1993, stood up for sexual minority rights and brought human rights debates into public space. The Lithuanian Red Cross, re-established in 2000, played a bridging role by working with municipalities to reach vulnerable people.

Collectively, these forms of resistance put pressure on institutions to become more accountable and created alternative sources of legitimacy and services for citizens. They began to fill the democratic gap that hardening had created.

Slide 7 — Reconciliation (4:00)

Fourth stage: Reconciliation. Resistance often needs to lead somewhere practical. In Lithuania, many civil society initiatives eventually found pathways to work with the very institutions they had criticized. This shift required dialogue, trust-building, and practical needs on both sides. And here we should remember the tension we discussed earlier. Push for change vs assist in change-making. Many of these civil society groups encounter this tension every day. Demanding vs stepping in and providing solutions. Both are crucial but in practice it is extremely hard to choose when to be a watchdog and when to stand shoulder to shoulder in change making.

Examples include Save the Children Lithuania partnering with ministries to implement child protection programs, Food Bank Lithuania coordinating food redistribution through municipal cooperation, and the National NGO Coalition taking part in policy dialogues and capacity building.

These partnerships increased service quality, allowed NGOs to influence policy, and normalized regular cooperation. Reconciliation does not erode civic independence; it opens possibilities for co-creation while keeping critical oversight.

Slide 8 — Case Study: Prison & Probation Volunteering (2:00)

A concrete, small-scale example of reconciliation in practice comes from prison and probation volunteering. The NGO *Prirašytos Rankos* brings volunteers into closed institutions to run educational and creative activities.

I coordinate a project that involves our students in prison volunteering, and I am also personally engaged in various activities organized by *Prirašytos Rankos*. This organization is pioneering the field of prison volunteering in Lithuania — even managing to enter institutions as rigid and rule-driven as the Prison Department and probation services. Step by step, trust is being built. With every year, we can offer more meaningful services to the prison population.

For instance, five years ago it would have been unimaginable to record a podcast where inmates could share their daily realities, yet now this is a reality. As trust grows between the institution and the organization, the Prison Department becomes more open and willing to cooperate. This leads to more services, greater change, wider public involvement, and stronger trust between society and correctional institutions.

Through volunteer stories, public debates, and collaborative events, people begin to see that the Prison Department in Lithuania is an institution that can be worked with.

I also personally serve as a mentor for an underaged girl on probation. As a mentor, I try to humanize probation officers for her — to show that, despite the uniforms and formal authority that can create distance, many of them are genuinely well-meaning. When my mentee sees that I, someone she likes and trusts, cooperate openly with probation officers, she begins to wonder whether they might not be so bad after all.

In sum, volunteers humanize people in custody; staff begin to see civic actors as partners; and communities start to reconnect with those affected by the justice system and the institutions responsible for them. Such volunteering increases social capital — it is a direct and powerful mechanism for building trust between citizens and institutions.

Slide 9 — Transformation (2:30)

Finally: Transformation. In this workshop, when we talk about *Transformation*, we mean a stage where trust has been rebuilt — where institutions and citizens start co-creating solutions, and civil society becomes a meaningful contributor to democratization rather than just an observer or critic.

Transformation is not about perfection. It's about reaching a point where cooperation becomes the norm, not the exception — where institutions are open enough to listen, and civil society strong enough to act responsibly and constructively.

In Lithuania, we can already see several clear signs of this shift.

First, **public trust** has improved significantly.
Research by Valentinavičius and colleagues in 2025 shows that pride in Lithuania's democratic processes grew from just over 23% in 2013 to 55% in 2024. That's more than doubling in a decade — a sign that citizens increasingly feel that democracy is *their* system, not someone else's.

Second, **civil society itself has become more sustainable.**
According to Freedom House, Lithuanian NGOs have strengthened their legal, financial, and reputational foundations. They've proven resilient — especially during COVID-19 and in response to geopolitical challenges. This kind of stability shows that civil society is not just surviving, but maturing.

Third, **citizen engagement** is on the rise.
The same 2025 study highlights that more Lithuanians feel ready to face social crises together and believe that recovery is possible through joint effort. This reflects a growing sense of civic responsibility — the feeling that what happens in society depends on all of us.

And finally, **institutional collaboration** has deepened.
During both the pandemic and the response to the war in Ukraine, civil society organizations and state institutions worked side by side to provide support, coordinate aid, and reach vulnerable communities. These partnerships have helped rebuild public trust and made governance more transparent and responsive.

So when we say *transformation*, we're talking about this — the gradual creation of a culture where cooperation replaces cynicism, and where democracy feels lived, not just declared."

Slide 10 — Discussion

Now we'll move into our group discussion.

You'll work in groups of four people. Preferably with people from diferent contexts or countries.
You'll have **25 minutes in total** for this activity.

First, choose **one timekeeper** in your group to help everyone stay within the time limits.
Each person will have **up to four minutes** to share about their own context — it could be your country, your organization, or a community you know well.

As you speak, reflect on these four guiding questions:

1. Where do you see *hardening* — areas of mistrust, rigidity, or distance between institutions and citizens?
2. What forms of *resistance* exist — how do people or groups respond, organize, or push for change?
3. What examples of *reconciliation or transformation* can you already see — moments of cooperation, dialogue, or rebuilding trust?
4. And finally — and this is the most important part — after everyone has shared, work **together as a group** to think of *starting points or first steps* for each other's contexts.
   Try to offer ideas, not big final solutions — just small, realistic actions that could begin to build trust or create cooperation.

You can think of this as advice you'd give to a friend working in another place: What could be the very first move toward change?

Please make sure to leave **five minutes at the end** of your group time for one person to prepare a short summary of what was discussed — especially the ideas and starting points that emerged.
That person will briefly present your reflections to everyone when we come back together.