

‘Holding’ Warsaw: Exploring Conditions for Harnessing Urban Conflict to Mitigate Polarization and Renew Democratic Institutions

Can people still live together in diverse democratic communities? Increasingly, it feels like we are losing that basic ability. Social conflicts are hardening into polarized stalemates, fueled by ideological divisions, rising economic inequalities, and declining trust in public institutions.

Polarization may look like open conflict, but it often hides a deeper problem: conflict avoidance. People either retreat into “echo chambers,” hearing only voices like their own, or, in extreme cases, turn to violence—tempted to end conflict by trying to eliminate the other side rather than engaging with it constructively. Yet history shows that when handled well, conflict can be one of democracy’s greatest sources of progress. Differences and tensions, rather than being ignored or suppressed, can release energy for positive change.

Cities are unique places where this can happen. They have long been laboratories for democracy, turning diverse opinions and interests into cultural creativity, civic innovation, and social progress. In Poland, while polarization is often described as an urban-rural divide, city life itself is increasingly affected. As the nation’s capital, Warsaw experiences the pressures of national politics and global economic forces, all of which intensify local tensions.

This project turns Warsaw into a real-world laboratory for exploring how conflicts can be managed constructively. It asks:

What kinds of institutions and practices are needed to transform urban conflicts into opportunities for reducing polarization and renewing democratic life?

To answer this, the project draws on methods from high-stakes peace mediation and conflict resolution, adapting them for everyday urban governance. At the heart of the project is the idea of a **‘holding environment.’** This is a structured, facilitated space where groups can safely confront tensions arising from conflicting interests, loyalties, and identities. Unlike ‘safe spaces’ that, associated with political correctness, protect participants from the tension of difference, holding environments encourage honest expression of challenging emotions and opinions, combining psychological safety with productive discomfort.

The project has three goals:

- **Conceptualize:** Clarify what a holding environment is, drawing on research from psychology, conflict studies, and organizational development.
- **Learn from practice:** Examine how experienced mediators and conflict resolution practitioners create holding environments in real-world conflicts.
- **Experiment:** Test these ideas in a facilitated holding environment designed around a contemporary urban conflict in Warsaw, refining the concept while exploring its potential for renewing local democracy.

By studying and experimenting with holding environments, the project aims to show that urban conflicts don’t have to divide us—they can be harnessed to strengthen democratic life, foster dialogue, and turn tension into transformation.