

Beyond War: Causes of Conflict, Prospects for Peace Conference
June 2, Dinner Program Speakers

Nadja Drost Remarks

Good evening everyone, it's a real pleasure to be with you here tonight. And thank you to the Pulitzer Center for inviting me to share some thoughts with you about reporting today in Colombia, following a historic peace deal between the Colombian government and the FARC, the country's largest guerrilla group.

I moved to Colombia in 2009 with the idea to spend 2 or 3 years there. Somehow, three became nine – I'm sure others in the room after going abroad have similarly felt tricked by multiplication.

When peace negotiations started, and a deal was eventually signed in 2016, it felt like a huge privilege to be reporting on a long-awaited moment that could change the course of Colombia's 52 years of war.

But now, over a year after the peace deal was approved, the end of the war is still at stake, and peace remains elusive.

And that means that reporting on Colombia now is, I think, perhaps even more important than before.

I have the sense that outside of Colombia, there exists the general impression that because a peace accord was finally approved, and over 7,000 members of the FARC disarmed, things are OK now in Colombia.

But the laying down of weapons wasn't the end point of the conflict. It was just the start of a long road of constructing peace. In fact, Colombia's peace process is unraveling faster than it is coming together.

A couple months ago, myself and Bruno Federico, also a Pulitzer Center grantee seated over there, went on assignment for the PBS *NewsHour*, and with the Pulitzer Center's help, to Northern Colombia where, one after another community leader was being gunned down.

One campesino leader told us that even though the FARC were gone, it felt like nothing had changed after the peace deal. Paramilitary groups and drug-trafficking gangs were fighting to fill the vacuum of power over the territory abandoned by the FARC, and government authority hadn't stepped in. He made the distinction that communities were not living a post-conflict era; he described it as post-accord.

The peace accord commits to a strategy of ridding Colombia of coca—the plant that is the raw material for cocaine—through government programs that help

farmers who have eradicated their coca crops, to grow alternative, and legal crops and get them to market.

But many farmers in the region who had already eradicated their crops, were still waiting for government help to make the switch to legal ones. And in the meantime, drug trafficking groups, interested in keeping coca crops abundant, had started killing community leaders who were convincing fellow farmers to sign up for the government program. The campesinos, yet again, were caught in the middle.

As I listened to these farmers, I was struck with a terribly sad sense of déjà vu: I was standing on the banks of the same river where seven years earlier, inhabitants had told me their stories of being caught between 2 warring drug-trafficking groups. The names of the groups had changed, but the dynamic was the same.

Today, like seven years ago, they were living amidst the re-organization of violence, following the demobilization of an armed group.

Last time, when I went to look for campesinos affected by the violence, I walked into villages cloaked in silence, because everyone had fled.

Today, Bruno and I literally stumbled upon a few hundred indigenous campesinos who had been displaced by the drug gangs teaching them a deadly lesson to keep growing coca.

Many people are surprised to find out that Colombia has 7 million displaced people. But that entire communities are being displaced *after* a peace deal, is even more surprising.

Seven years later, I thought, what had changed?

Colombia's peace accords aim to resolve many of the issues that gave rise to the conflict or perpetuated it—Addressing inequalities in rural areas through land reform, for example.

If these elements of the peace deal, the ones that get at the roots of the violence, don't get implemented, Colombia has little chance of replacing war with peace. That's why right now, it's so important that journalists be reporting on post-accord Colombia, drawing attention to where are the gaping holes of implementation so that they get filled.

Right now, thousands of ex-combatants feel the government has come up short on their commitments help them reintegration into civilian life. An estimated 1,500 of them have already picked up arms again and joined FARC dissident groups. In a couple weeks, Colombia will choose a new president; the front-runner is a candidate vowing to un-do parts of the peace deal.

We need journalists to be holding both the government and the FARC accountable to their peace deal commitments, to help ensure they follow through on them.

In order to do that kind of reporting, we need to do it from the ground—to be able to challenge narratives that often take hold but are disconnected from reality and that distort public perception.

In Colombia, that means leaving the city centres, filled with gleaming high-rises and going to the rural areas that have been most marginalized by the government, and media coverage.

This is where what is often called ‘the other Colombia’ lies. It’s here where children need to walk an hour on a mudpath to a school that half the time doesn’t have a teacher. It’s here where, when people go to the local store, they pay with coca paste instead of Colombian pesos. It’s here where armed groups are the defacto authority, and in the face of no better opportunity, are often are the most promising career choice for youth.

Getting to these places can take days of travel by plane, bus, truck, motorized canoes or mules – and it’s costly.

Supporting travel costs is a challenge for most media organizations, especially today. But its particularly tough for freelance journalists. When you’re taking travel expenses out of your salary—which is most often nothing to write home about—it often means you cut corners wherever you can—maybe You choose *not* to hire a driver with a car who can take you out of a possibly dangerous situation, for example.

But when you have organizations like the Pulitzer Center on board, who are financially supporting your travel, it means you make decisions based on what’s best for the reporting, and for your safety.

I can not overstate the importance of media organizations like the Pulitzer Center filling that void. Supporting the kind of reporting that is crucial to building narratives based on reality, helping reporters get to the places they need to do a good job of truth-telling.

The idea of less reporting coming out of places that need it the most is a scary one to me.

In a world where news is becoming increasingly myopic, going to the far corners is even more important.

Let’s keep going there. Thank you.