

Vacation from War

Dialogues across Borders



Autumn Bulletin 2020

"We have masks, we have the will, and we are not short of ideas"

Dear donors,
dear supporters,

The above quote is taken from a Facebook post by the network Youth United in Peace from the Former Yugoslavia. In August, in spite of the Corona pandemic, a small group of committed activists met in person to explore possibilities for activities in the second half of the year.

This year is one of the most challenging years in the history of *Vacation from War*. Under the conditions of the pandemic, the very activities that are at the heart of our work are difficult if not impossible to carry out: meetings of large groups, often involving long journeys for participants.

Accordingly, 2020 is a turbulent year for us. While at the beginning of the year we were still hoping to be able to implement our activities - perhaps with a special hygiene concept - it became clear in spring that we would have to break new ground this year.

Our partners in the Former Yugosla-

via and in Israel and Palestine made plans for alternative activities during spring, both for digital and face-to-face meetings. These plans had to be constantly adapted according to the changing conditions, which made their implementation very difficult. After the first Corona-wave in Israel and Palestine subsided, a possible annexation of the Jordan Valley and other areas of the West Bank by the Israeli state threatened (and still threaten) the region. Many former participants took part in demonstrations against the Netanyahu government and in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter protests.

Then there, the second wave of infections with renewed exit restrictions hit Israel and Palestine. Nevertheless, our partners have managed to continue their important work in new ways: They have organized numerous online meetings.

In Israel and Palestine, participants met during the lockdown in un-national groups digitally or in small groups in person. In August, former

Palestinian participants of the Allenders-Seminar met for a follow-up meeting in Jericho; the Israeli group met in Jerusalem and holds monthly online meetings focusing on forms and possibilities of activism and non-violent action. After a phase of online meetings, the Women*seminar team is planning a series of uni- and bi-national physical meetings for the last months of this year up until spring 2021.

Our partners in the former Yugoslavia are also struggling with the pandemic and the instrumentalization of Corona by their governments – for instance in Serbia, where President Vučić eased restrictions in order to hold elections and influence the outcome in his favour, only to reinstate the restrictions immediately afterwards.

However, also in this project region young people were able to remain active.

In addition to online meetings, eleven YU-Peace activists took part in a workshop week in Srebrenica with

the motto "Dealing with the Past to Rethink the Future", organized by the Memorial Centre Srebrenica and the Post-Conflict Research Centre of Bosnia-Herzegovina on the occasion

of the 25th anniversary of the massacre. YU-Peace is planning a meeting for World Day of Peace at the end of September and other activities - at least locally in the re-

spective cities; we will keep you updated about this online and in our annual report which we will publish next spring.

Supporting and caring for each other during the crisis

Jelena Stulic is a long-standing member of YU-Peace and co-founder of LINK, our partner organization in Sombor. In the beginning of September she spoke with Katharina Ochsendorf about the current situation and the work of YU-Peace under Corona conditions.

K.O.: What is the current situation in Serbia?

J.S.: There have been 31,849 Corona cases registered so far, 723 of which ended deadly. Since the measures have been eased and the curfews lifted following protests of citizens about a month ago, it is actually obligatory to wear masks in closed rooms. But many people do not follow this rule. The measures vary from city to city and the regulations are also interpreted differently from person to person. Government information on the pandemic is largely incorrect and it changes constantly, depending on the political situation in the country. For example, before the parliamentary elections, the number of infected people stagnated - the day after the elections the number of

infected people suddenly rose sharply and the situation became alarming. Before the election, a football match between the two best-known clubs in Serbia was played in front of an audience authorized by the so-called "Crisis Unit for the Containment of COVID 19", while meetings of more than ten people were not allowed.

K.O.: And how is the work at LINK at the moment?

J.S.: The curfews, which lasted for about three months from March onwards, had an enormous impact on us personally and on our organization. On the one hand, we were afraid of being infected with Corona; on the other hand, many people feared for their livelihoods, as they had lost their paid work, which they do in addition to their work at LINK. We had curfews four days a week, which seriously affected our mental health. Worst of all, we never really knew how many people in our town and country were infected. When the measures were eased and we were able to go outside, thanks to the

funds provided by Medica Mondiale from Cologne and Ana and Vlade Divac from Serbia, we were able to distribute around 80 aid packages and shopping vouchers to single mothers, families

and others who were particularly affected by the pandemic. Only thanks to the active help of YU-Peace activists it was possible to find the people in need and distribute the aid packages.

What I will also always remember is the cross-border solidarity with my friends from YU-Peace, which has proved its worth even in these difficult times. During video conferences we exchanged information about the situation in our countries. But above all, we supported each other every day during the lockdown and faced this situation together. It was precisely the point where the strength of YU-Peace became particularly visible, something I am proud of and very grateful for!

K.O.: What has the YU-Peace project been like so far this year?

J.S.: During the curfews we talked every week with the members of YU-Peace from Serbia: about how they feel, what they think about the situation and what they do during the curfews. We also sent them links to online training courses. We exchanged films and series, mainly on human rights, which we discussed later at the online meetings. In addition, we were in constant exchange with the older staff to find out what the situation is like in their countries and how we could possibly implement the online camp. Now it is certain that despite Corona, some active people from all three countries will meet in Srebrenica on 21st September to celebrate the World Peace Day.



Looking forward: the founders of LINK in their new office.

K.O.: Do you think that the pandemic will have long-term effects on YU-Peace?

J.S.: The situation in all three countries is certainly not good at the moment. It affects everything, including YU-peace. But I am 100% certain

of the strength and power of our team and the young activists who make up the network. In case the situation does not improve, we will have online meetings where a great team will develop a range of different activities. In this way, as during

the first Corona wave, the youngsters will stay in touch online and find new ways to work for peace. We have been through a lot together, so I don't think that Corona will be the end of a community like YU-Peace!

„It is inspiring to see how these women continue to engage in socio-political activities together“

(Text: Dina G.) The past few months were very troubling and intense on the socio-political level in Israel. Covid-19 has not only affected the public health and the financial situation but also vastly put a spotlight on the inequality between different groups in our society and their access to resources.

Whether it's the Palestinian community in Israel who is even more deeply discriminated against in times of emergency or minority groups inside the Jewish society whose struggles are even more strongly silenced in times of crisis.

In times like this, as politically involved women we feel an even stronger need for a sense of community and a political home where it is legitimate to express despair, anger and to support each other.

This is why we as the leading team of the project decided to reach out to our former participants in the seminar from recent years and try to create a platform for them to meet and share their thoughts, emotions and ideas in this difficult time.

25 women from the past four years of the program gladly applied to take part in a follow up program, and the first meeting took place last month, in Jaffa, where the participants took part in a political tour lead by the *System Ali* musical group. The group performs songs in four languages:

Arabic, Hebrew, English and Russian and in the tour they address the complexity of Jaffa as a mixed city, with a troubling history of the elimination of the Palestinian identity, and a troubling present of gentrification and discrimination of Palestinians living in it today, as well as alienation and racism against all non-Ashkenazi identities, such as Russian, Ethiopian and Mizrahi Jews.

System Ali's artists had met each other in *Sadaka Reut*, an NGO that works to bring Jewish underprivileged groups and Palestinians together, whilst bringing to discussion structures of power and societal hierarchy, which all are brought to life in the personal stories the artists bring to the tour.

The strongest understanding, I believe, we as political women can embrace is that the personal is political. That our personal experiences have a meaning and a context from which we must learn

and can teach others. This is what we also base our educational approach in the seminar on, by sharing our experiences and learning from them, as we consider them a valuable knowledge.

Having the former participants continue to discuss the complexi-



ties in their society, understanding more deeply their own identities and the identities of the "other" is something we strive to preserve. And it is inspiring and encouraging to be able to see this group of women continuing to engage in socio-political issues together, despite the challenges, both technical and psychological, we face at this time.



Time for project development and new formats - Digital Newsletter and lecture events

We are also using the time in this year, in which our normal activities are limited, to reflect upon and further develop our project. Our partners in the project regions as well as the members of the coordination group here in Germany have often met digitally and in person throughout the year. Together we have reflected upon and evaluated the work of the project so far, identified challenges and strengths and designed concepts for the further development of *Vacation from War*.

At the same time, we have strengthened our presence in the digital world and are pleased to be able to offer you our information in the form of a digital newsletter from now on. You can easily subscribe to it via our website.

You can use this offer as a supplement or instead of the printed version of our publications - please let us know by e-mail or telephone if you want to receive our information only digitally in the future.

We have also translated our website into English! The site will be launched at www.vacation-from-war.com at the end of September / beginning of October and will also be accessible

from the German website with just one click. We would be happy if you share this news with your English speaking friends.

Finally, we are planning a series of lecture and discussion events with our partners from Israel and Palestine in the end of November.

From 22.11. to 29.11.2020, the two coordinators of the Women*seminar will come to Germany, report on their work in the project and discuss it with interested people in the cities of Heidelberg, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Marburg, Cologne and Freiburg! The series of events is kindly supported by the respective regional foundations and the federal foundation of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

As it is currently not certain whether the events can take place, mainly due to travel restrictions, we are currently working on an online format in which the speakers can be connected via video conference.

We will share further information on this, as well as an invitation to the series of events, on our homepage and via Facebook. There you will also find information about registration for the - digital or physical - events.

We appreciate your interest!

Donate and Support

Vacation from War continues – Also in times of the Covid-19 pandemic we need your financial support for our peace work!

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Editorial

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