



## AUTUMN BULLETIN 2024

### Dear supporters,

“Speak Up” looks back on a summer that was characterised by the desire to talk to each other, by deep solidarity and joint action, but also accompanied by war and violence, especially for our partners in Israel and Palestine.

On September 21<sup>st</sup>, the International Day of Peace, partners in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia celebrated the success of 30 years of work for peaceful coexistence. In Tuzla, they commemorated three decades of peace work – which lives on in the Youth United in Peace (YU-Peace) network.

In July, The YU-Peace Continental Camp for activists took place, also in Tuzla.

The group visited the Potočari memorial site, the Memorial Centre and the memorial room for Serbian victims in Srebrenica. They had previously spoken about the 1994 massacre of Muslims in workshops; the direct confrontation with the graves, the films and the testimonies of flight was nevertheless shocking. The group found the visit to the memorial room for Serbian victims important, as these victims are usually either completely ignored in local narratives or on the contrary portrayed as the only ‘true’ victims. A Muslim participant who had lost

many family members in the genocide emphasised how important it was for her to also hear about the suffering of the Serbs.

Shortly afterwards, this year’s peace camp took place in Seget Donji in Croatia with 67 young people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia. They talked about the war in their countries and its effects to this day. In workshops on topics such as hate speech, stereotypes and discrimination, they discussed how they can counter hate speech and reflected on their own prejudices. Tahir Zustra, former participant and now a well-known journalist in Bosnia and Herzegovina, showed how young people can identify and counter media manipulation. Towards the end of the camp, everyone discussed how they can become more active in their home towns. The camp concluded with a joint public action in Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje (p. 4).

### Joint dialogue in spite of war and violence

The situation in Israel and Palestine continues to deteriorate. Ceasefire negotiations over Gaza are stalling, the Israeli army is stepping up its attacks in the West Bank. “This is worse than the se-

cond Intifada. Nablus, Jenin, Hebron, the army is everywhere (...) and never before have the settlers built new settlements at such speed”, describes Salma F. (*name changed*), Palestinian coordinator of the Dialogue Seminar for women. At the same time, within Israel, resistance to the government’s policies is growing. Hundreds of thousands recently took to the streets in Tel Aviv, at the beginning of September, there was even a general strike.

It is particularly impressive that despite the terrible and life-threatening situation on the ground, 18 women from Palestine and Israel were prepared to meet in Germany this August. Instead of a traditional dialogue seminar, selected participants from last year met for an in-depth dialogue; the events of October 7th were subject of particularly heated discussion. The focus was also on the joint conceptual development of the programme for future years (p. 2).

Palestinians with Israeli citizenship from our partner organisation Seekers (*name changed*) have already met twice in September, and a meeting with Jewish activists is imminent. Meetings of the Palestinian group in the West Bank continue to take place digitally, meetings with the

other two groups are still not possible due to the security situation. Furthermore, with an ongoing series of lectures and discussions in Israel, Seekers is countering divisive discourse spread widely in Israeli society right now. At the same

time, the recruiting process for youngsters wanting to join the new bi-annual groups has begun. They are to enter into a dialogue process from the end of 2024 onwards. “We are also developing our methodological tools, advising people

and organisations who ask us for help (...) we are doing all this while fighting despair,” reports Karim A. (name changed), Palestinian coordinator in the West Bank.

## DIALOGUE SEMINAR FOR WOMEN: “CAN WE AS ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS BUILD A CONNECTION WITHOUT RECOGNITION?”

Rarely has the realisation of a Dialogue Seminar been as uncertain as this year. As already reported this spring and summer, the devastating political, social and economic situation in Palestine and Israel at by now almost all levels makes dialogue almost impossible.

However, our partners in the region already last winter were determined to make every effort to organise a seminar for this year – despite all the obstacles and precisely because of the current situation.

The planning and preparation process were filled with many hurdles and challenges. The ever-worsening military escalation in Gaza, the rapidly increasing violence in the West Bank, shrinking spaces for civil society and increasing repression in Israel as well as the ongoing militarisation of Israeli society: in addition to the political pressure on activists, the emotional pressure is also very

high. Every day, people on the ground are afraid, with more dreadful news pouring on them constantly.

Participants and the team of this year's Dialogue Seminar for women had come a long way when they set off for Germany at the beginning of August.

Then, the seminar was in danger failing at the last minute: on Thursday evening, the airline cancelled all flights to and from Tel Aviv – less than 48 hours before the group was due to depart. Fearing a possible attack from Iran, many airlines had temporarily discontinued their flights. Only few aircrafts were still flying to and from Tel Aviv and it was unclear whether Israeli airspace would be completely closed at short notice. Therefore, an alternative had to be found quickly for the part of the group that was due to fly from Tel Aviv.

In the end, 15 team members, Jewish-Israeli participants and Palestinian partici-

pants with Israeli citizenship had to travel via Cyprus.

Unfortunately, the only option for the flight from Tel Aviv was to travel with an Israeli airline. Our partners usually avoid this, as the security checks there have regularly turned into an ordeal in the past, especially for Palestinians with Israeli citizenship and from East Jerusalem.

This time too, Palestinian participants were stopped and questioned at the security checkpoint. When security staff realised it was dealing with an Israeli-Palestinian group that wanted to travel to Germany together and one participant under the pressure of the questioning mentioned that she was going to a dialogue seminar, the entire group was taken to a separate room. There, they were treated harshly: all luggage was extensively checked, all group members were searched, patted down and questioned.

The participants were heavily burdened by this treatment. Many were very afraid that they might now be on the authorities' radar, spyware might have been installed on their mobile phones and they might run into problems when re-entering the country. It was a terrible experience for everyone. At the same time, it created a special bond within the group. Esther K. (name changed), a Jewish-Israeli participant, described the experience after arriving in Germany as follows: “(...) To experience together with the Palestinians all that they have to go through every time they fly was really meaningful. That moment, not from a story that someone tells, but actually being there and going through that, the security checks (...) and all that, when for a mo-

ment, they saw us as one. (...) It was part of the way.”

As the flight from Tel Aviv was over six hours late, the group missed their connecting flight to Germany and had to spend a night in Cyprus. They only arrived in Germany two days later than originally planned.

The small group travelling from the West Bank had moved up their journey to Amman in order to avoid any delays caused by closed checkpoints or increased controls and was able to reach their flight.

The particular concept of this year's seminar worked out: the small group of selected participants from last year's group was able to engage in an in-depth dialogue process and at the same time participated in the advancement of the seminar programme for the coming years.

The dialogue was very different from 2023: on the one hand, the participants already knew each other, which created a certain basic level of trust in the group. On the other hand, the political framework conditions have changed so drastically since October 7th that the emotionality and intensity of the dialogue has increased noticeably. Leen D. (name changed), a participant from the West Bank, shared: “It was difficult to come here after October 7th. (...) I sit with Israelis in a dialogue group and at the same time I follow the news every day. I see the Israeli [military] attacks, I see people dying, it's anything but easy. It's a challenge every day.” Keyla T. (name changed), a Jewish-Israeli participant, reports: “[It] is very difficult, very challenging. You can feel that it influences the dialogue and interpersonal contact between the participants. (...) On the other hand, it also feels 'right' somehow [because] we are in a very intense war (...)”

This year, participants were primarily motivated by two aspects: to participate in the further development of the seminar and at the same time to engage in dialogue with each other again. Esther K. expressed her motivation as follows: “(...) I left here last time with the feeling that I wasn't finished, that there was still more to do (...) and I also feel that the current situation obligates me to deal with it (...)”.



In Dialogue: In small groups, participants discuss what they think is important for future seminars

Alethia B. (name changed), Palestinian with Israeli citizenship, describes her vision for future dialogues as follows: “My vision is to have these very difficult conversations, but in a way that also ‘protects’ my narrative in a certain way.” This year's group not only managed to hold intensive discussions about the current situation, but also to talk about overall goals and expectations of the seminar. In a participatory process, they worked on the seminar's concept in terms of both methodology and content. “One [other] thing that came up in our conversations was this whole question: ‘Do I expect the Israelis to recognise my Palestinian history?’ So, to acknowledge the Nakba, the illegitimacy of the war in Gaza.... is that a healthy expectation for a dialogue seminar? Or can we as Israelis and Palestinians build a connection without this recognition? My personal vision would be that this seminar creates recognition (...) and the Israelis take responsibility in a way. This can also be difficult for the Palestinian side the other way around: when I was confronted with the question of whether I would take responsibility for what Hamas did, it was a very difficult conversation for me. (...) So it has to do with whether participants are [generally] willing to recognise things”, Alethia B. shares.

Overall, the seminar was an empowering, significant, but also difficult and emotionally challenging experience for both the participants and the team; together they laid an important foundation for the coming years of the seminar – an incredible success given the developments on the ground.

The methodological and content-related sessions participants developed will be taken up by the local team in the next few months and, together with the many other ideas, integrated into a new seminar programme. At the same time, the Palestinian-Israeli team is to be expanded; joint binational facilitation training sessions are also planned. These plans give hope – even if the political situation is unlikely to ease in the foreseeable future.

During an excursion to Bonn, the group participated in a workshop by the project “(K)einheit” and learned about the history of German separation into two states after World War II and the re-unification from 1989 onwards





## A SIGN OF PEACE AND TOGETHERNESS: CROSSING THE “LINE”

For many years, the youngsters of YU-Peace appeared in public during the Peace Camps at the seaside in one of the neighbouring towns. They wore self-designed T-shirts with peace slogans, sung songs or attracted attention with a joint performance.

These public interventions of the groups were important because through them, participants gained positive experiences and afterwards had more courage to publicly stand up for the goals of Youth United in Peace at home.

This year, our partners decided to end the peace camp in Seget Donji with a joint public action in one of the partner cities.

On the way home, the group stopped in Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje (GVU), a town from which young people have been coming to the Camps on the Croatian Adriatic for many years. During the Yugoslavian war, the town experienced fierce fighting between Croatian and Muslim inhabitants. Since then, GVU has been divided by an invisible border: Bosniaks live in Gornji Vakuf and Croats in Uskoplje. The school building is also divided, with pupils studying in ethnically segregated groups on different floors and having to use different entrances.

Youngsters from GVU are under particularly high pressure from relatives and neighbours when they go to the seaside with the 'others'; public activities in their town are very difficult for them.

In former years, groups have already travelled to GVU twice and danced and sang at the invisible demarcation line. During each visit, there were many con-

versations in the town and young people were encouraged to come to join activities of YU-Peace.

After the joint discussions in Seget Donji, the youngsters came to GVU very motivated.

They chose 'Ruka spajamo, Mir stvaramo' – “When we join hands, we create peace” as the slogan for this year's Camp. They wore their T-shirts designed with this slogan during the action.

At first, they walked in two rows along the road that forms the invisible dividing line of the city. Again and again, some ran across the road and pulled young people over to them from the other side. “Our aim was to show that it's actually quite easy to cross the 'line'”; Haris from GVU explained the action.

In a moment when no cars were coming, everyone met in the centre of the street for a group hug. They then spread out a huge white cloth in the city's central square, on which they had painted the blue dove of peace and all left their handprints in bright colours. They sang peace songs and pop songs that are popular in all parts of the former Yugoslavia.

“It was just the time when everyone was coming home from work”, said Vlasta Markovic, regional coordinator, “everyone saw us, some asked who we were and what we were doing. Many cheered us on. Two old women even cried because it reminded them of the time before the war, when everyone lived together peacefully. It really encouraged all of us.”

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#### Editorial

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