

Militarism is the elephant in the climate room Heidi MEINZOLT

a subjective report about the International Peace Conference for Ukraine in Vienna (depl tr)



There was the elephant on the stage when several hundred committed peace fighters and human rights defenders - among them at least half women and a notable presence from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom from Europe - met recently in Vienna. The goal was to illuminate ways to end the war in Ukraine from a civil society perspective. Norwegian League women had brought the elephant to visually demonstrate to all the devastating consequences for people and the environment - dangers that are so readily ignored in the current debate: Destruction of infrastructure, laying of mines, contamination of whole (agricultural) regions, massive CO2 input

into air, soil and water by military actions. Massive military exercises of the alliances increase the damage and destroy all previous climate efforts with already now transboundary dramatic effects. In addition, the global supply situation is extremely endangered by failing grain supplies for areas where climate change is already destroying livelihoods and producing famines with the consequence of new conflict hotspots.

Nevertheless, the killing continues, the military - also sexualized - violence produces immeasurable suffering, fears, all too justified anger at the brutal aggressor and war criminal. This massively affects the mutual understanding of those who work for peace, complicates the cooperation of civil society and hovers over all encounters of peace-moving anti-militarists. The loss of home and the forced flight became a brutal reality for many women and children, which can only be absorbed in a fragmentary way by "storytelling".

However, the "Voices for Peace" still exist, albeit rather quietly and discredited. To hear this voice, to ask critical questions and to strengthen solidarity is a mission that the Vienna Conference had also set itself in order to stand against the brutalization of social dialogue: the loss of human lives is checked off as collateral damage - whether they drown in the Mediterranean, die on the Balkan route, starve to death or are victims of war. The militarization of minds and hardening of hearts are felt far beyond the borders of Ukraine and neighbouring states and must be addressed.

War, in addition to the danger of climate collapse and human suffering, creates enormous economic damage by focusing on ever higher levels of destruction and the accumulation of weapons. Money, on the other hand, is lacking everywhere for health, climate protection, education, social measures to ensure the provision of basic necessities for a life in dignity. At the same time, arms giants make astronomical profits that are not skimmed by any excess profits tax. The neoliberal agenda for reconstruction and post-war is fully in planning at the donor conferences - practically excluding civil society - as it was after all wars in the last decades. New conflict potential and injustices are thus programmed.

WHERE ARE THE SOLUTIONS?

Where are actually recognizable diplomatic interventions, where are the processes that could initiate a stop to the killing, prepare for a ceasefire, plan for negotiations also about the withdrawal of the aggressor? The UN, the Pope, the OSCE, international think tanks, smart thinkers and experienced diplomats in all parts of the world have ideas - who is taking them up? For the civil society that met in Vienna, this is an absolute must! Unfortunately, the proposals and initiatives are largely lost.

Instead, we have to deal with a clearly perceptible paralysis of all political circles nationally, European, transatlantic, orchestrated by fatal interest haggling about spheres of influence, old and new enemy images and the focus on purely military self-defense. "Helplessness," as was already the official motto of the Munich Security Conference in 2022, combined with an explosive mixture of rejection of pacifism as a new realism, unilateral calls for a "victory peace" against Russian imperialism as the supposed only way out of the catastrophe. The media mainstream orchestrates this helplessness and thus discredits, slanders and endangers existentially pacifists, activists of civil

resistance especially from the post-Soviet space as well as conscientious objectors, human rights defenders, peace activists. It divides and increases militancy: Peace researchers develop and explain military strategies and speak of an "exceptional war", which causes the change of times and makes armament necessary, cynically in the name of the redefinition of prevention. Germany is drawing up a "national security strategy" that purports to secure the fortress of prosperity. Military alliances are booming with the recent NATO expansion in Northern Europe, right-wing political circles are contending as apostles of peace and jumping on the bandwagon.

PRE-DISCUSSION OF WOMEN'S VOICES FOR PEACE IN VIENNA

In Vienna, WILPF Austria had organized a dedicated pre-discussion of peace-moving women in the "Frauenhetz". The meeting brought together League women from Germany (from the Munich group), Norway, Denmark, Belarus/Lithuania, Italy, Spain, Afghanistan, including the international League president from Cameroon together with friends from the OSCE/CSP group from Georgia, Kosovo, Serbia, Armenia and Ukraine and partners of the 1000 Peace Women worldwide. In addition to the undisputed condemnation of the Russian war of aggression and the emphasis on the Ukrainians' right to self-defense under international law, the central demand was that everything possible be done to work towards an immediate ceasefire, which would have to make negotiations possible. The consensus was clear: peace from a feminist perspective is based on a root cause analysis of war and violence and is a way to work for de-militarization, a process worth fighting for. At the center is the concept of human security, which brings together committed people locally, nationally and in an international context, and brings women to the negotiating table on an equal footing.

INSPIRATIONS FROM THE WOMEN'S MEETING.

How difficult and controversial ceasefire negotiations and agreements are or can be, the representative from Armenia made clear again with the current experiences in the Karabakh conflict, and how important it is at the same time to co-determine the conditions for negotiations and to correct them through objections. How dangerous the proximity of the Ukraine war can be for neighboring regions and war-traumatized populations for re-traumatization, we learned from Georgia, where precisely for this reason young people are sustainably committed to their future. Serbian and Albanian women from Kosovo described how long-lasting tensions between groups can be and how important and purposeful civil society bridge-building can be on the ground. At the same time, however, everyone shared very enriching experiences of rapprochement processes, conversations with ombudspersons, letters to the international community, work based on the women's peace security agenda from local to regional and internationally networked.

We discussed the right to self-defense from both a legal, international law perspective that goes beyond the issue of weapons and military to empowerment, documentation of violence and war crimes, social support, solidarity measures, care. New feminist-pacifist motivations for becoming fit for national defense were also addressed.

VA Belarusian friend made everyone think when she said she understood the pain and despair from the context of war: "We are not perceived by everyone around us as people who consistently stand up for peace and against violence, who are helpless victims who beg for mercy from the aggressor who does not listen to them and continues to torment". But she also stressed that those who advocate for peace are also too easily ridiculed and ridiculed by others. They have become the target of bullying and harassment, she says, because everyone thinks you are powerless. She ends with an appeal, "I believe it's time to show the strength of our nonviolent movement and our ability to save lives and overcome this crazy world of violence."

PATHWAYS TO PEACE

So, after this pre-meeting, we were strengthened and sisterly motivated to walk the difficult path of "Pathways to Peace" together. Teams were formed for the entire conference, which in working groups dedicated themselves to questions about experiences with ceasefire, de-militarization, negotiations, and in a second step discussed perspectives towards peace and presented them in the plenary. The final declaration of the conference is a mosaic stone for a process, which we cannot and do not want to escape, especially from the more than 100 years of experience of the International Women's League on the cause of our feminist analysis of the causes of war and violence worldwide and our priority of prevention and "caring" for the people.

"Peace is a gift to see the future" emphasized a Ukrainian participant - a beautiful and at the same time sad sentence for coping with the present. It does not relieve anyone of the responsibility to be guided by the vision that peace is possible. We do not see ourselves as pacifists in a dead end, as an Austrian newspaper disparagingly wrote, but we stand on the shoulders of giants of the women's peace movement. On our agenda remains the unifying commitment against militarism, patriarchy and capitalism. I was glad to have been there.