

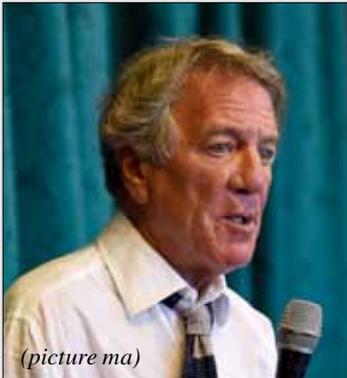
Current Concerns

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The New Iron Curtain The Ukraine crisis proves to be Europe's crucible and Europe proves a profound disappointment.

by Patrick Lawrence



(picture ma)

Patrick Lawrence is a writer, commentator, a longtime newspaper and magazine correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the "International Herald Tribune". He is a columnist, essayist, author and lecturer and writes often on Europe and Asia. Patrick Lawrence has published five books; his most recent book is *Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century*. His web site is patricklawrence.us. Support his work via his *Patreon* site.



Negotiating delegations in the conference hall in Minsk on 11 February 2015. The result was Minsk II, whose goal was, among other things, to end the war in the Donbass. (picture www.kremlin.ru)

We have read a great deal about a new Cold War since the US cultivated the coup of February 2014 in Ukraine and the nation was tragically divided against itself. Some of us have ruminated in print, in this publication and elsewhere, on this emergent reality.

With the back-to-back announcements that Finland and Sweden intend to apply for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Cold War II" is no longer merely a handy locution for columnists and those who pontificate on barstools.

The accession of these Nordic nations to Washington's principal instrument of power projection is assured and will be complete in very short order. This will solidify the wall Washington and its European clients insist on erecting to divide the world yet more perversely and destructively than it was for the four decades and some of Cold War I.

It would be hard to overstate the significance of this turn of events – for Finns,

Swedes and Russians, certainly, – but also for all Europeans and, at the horizon, for everyone on this planet, alive or yet to be born.

Remember the famous lines from Rudyard Kipling?

"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,

Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat..."

Kipling published *The Ballad of East and West* in 1889, the British Empire's high noon, and in it mourned the great divide between the imperial powers and their subjects. His deepest regret was for all the lost humanity obscured by the enduring but artificial line humans etched into the Earth long ago to distinguish the West from the rest.

Judgment Day appearing other than imminent, we will be in for many seasons of regret as Washington constructs the infrastructure that will define Cold War II. The Finns' and Swedes' accessions to NATO suggest an edifice more permanent than either the Iron Curtain or, on the other side

of the world post-1949, its bamboo variant. There will be few doors and windows in this wall – this by Washington's design. It will be hard to see either in or out.

Cold War II

And here's the thing about this profoundly misguided project. The populations of the Western post-democracies will pay a far higher price for letting their leaders build the thick stone wall of Cold War II than those it is supposed to consign to the wilderness. Westerners will pay this price in blindness, in ignorance, and in isolation from the global majority.

If your proposition is to isolate others – and the great majority of humanity wants no part of isolated others and a world of walls – you've probably got it backwards: He who would ostracise others will find himself ostracised.

It has turned out to be a hop-skip, I have to say, from "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall!" to erecting another as quickly as the stones can be set in place.

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“The New Iron Curtain”

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Now we know what President *Joe Biden* means by “Build Back Better.”*

Ever since the Russian intervention in Ukraine on Feb. 24, we have watched as many perfectly innocent people – musical conductors, athletes, professors, artists, writers – have lost their jobs or been otherwise censured for refusing to denounce the Russian incursion publicly, or in some cases simply for being Russian. It reminds me of a passage in the *New Testament*, *Matthew 15:11*: Roughly paraphrased, he who would defile another defiles only himself.

Sanctions

The sanctions Washington and its “allies and partners” have imposed on Russia and Russians now number more than 6,000. The results so far strongly suggest they are not working – a conclusion the policy cliques seem to be gradually acknowledging.

Last week Britain announced it was sanctioning *Vladimir Putin’s* ex-wife; a former gymnast reputed to be the Russian president’s girlfriend and three of his cousins. Western authorities are now down to chasing the yachts of wealthy Russians around the Mediterranean.

Can you beat this stuff for sheer indignity?

What we’ve seen so far, appalling as it has been, will evaporate when the time comes. Western concert halls will again permit renderings of *Rachmaninoff* and *Shostakovich*, “War and Peace” will be restored to university curricula.

The Finnish and Swedish decisions to join NATO are of another order. They have come but will not go. We must think similarly of the drastic efforts to reorganise global energy markets and sanction Russia out of them. What arrangements come of this will not easily be reversed. We now witness in short an historically significant, here-to-stay restructuring of the global order, such as it is, in real time.

A good map illustrates well enough the magnitude of what is about to happen. Washington has sought to bring NATO up to Russia’s borders since the Soviet Un-

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ion’s demise, but heretofore it has recruited only the three Baltic statelets among frontline nations – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

It failed to turn Georgia in 2008, it failed to push through yet another of its colour revolutions in Belarus last year, and, as things stand, Ukrainian membership appears a lost cause.

The map will also tell you much about why Russia determined to intervene in Ukraine three months ago (and why your columnist still considers this a regrettable but necessary undertaking). As the map indicates, finally, Finnish membership will consolidate NATO’s presence on Russia’s north-western flank. With Sweden’s accession, the Baltic Sea will become something like a NATO lake.

That’s the strategic picture, but the strategic picture is merely the framework of the world we are fated to live in for – as the best guesses now have it – decades to come, generations. Anyone who lived through Cold War I will share with me a profound disquietude, a sadness bordering on depression.

Among the very worst of Cold War I’s consequences was the narrowing of the American consciousness such that most citizens of our republic were rendered incapable of managing any kind of complexity. Everything was binary, Manichean, “the good guys and the bad guys,” as many a commentator – not just *Tom Friedman* – still thinks is fine to put on any given matter.

Americans haven’t managed to grow beyond the state of ignorance that Cold War I required before they are once again pushed back into it. Ukraine: the good guys. Russia: the bad guys. Making this case worse, the Europeans are now sign-

ing onto this simplistic view of the world, at the very moment they could have tempered America’s cornpone simplifications with needed nuance and sophistication.

A certain kind of nation is dying as we speak, and to me this is among the greatest of the losses we now witness. Finland has been neutral until now not only by treaty. It has been one of those few nations that straddle East and West by dint of geography, culture, social traditions and the like. You can see this, for instance, in its architecture in the respect Finnish culture assigns to the natural world, in the value it places on community – touches of the Asiatic.

Helsinki stood for the efficacy of diplomacy. The twain could meet there, as they did for the *Helsinki Accords* in 1975 and as they did when *George H. W. Bush* and *Mikhail Gorbachev* had their momentous encounter 15 years later.

Ukraine stood to be another such nation, divided as it is between the Galician west, tilted toward Europe, and the Russophone east, highly conscious of its “Russianness” by way of language, history, culture, familial ties and so on. This is why the essentially federal system outlined in the two *Minsk accords*, September 2014 and February 2015, was wise and humane — a plan that could have elevated Ukraine to something more than a failed state, an absolute mess, which is what we must count it now.

We cannot count Sweden neutral, even if *The New York Times* insists on repeating this error daily. But it was NATO-agnostic, let’s say, and this counted. Stockholm told the world, we are of the West, but we do not partake of Washington’s imperial adventures, and we decline to subjugate ourselves to its militarisation of trans-Atlantic relations.

It is all gone now. The Finns have surprised me. I thought they understood their singular place between East and West better than they apparently do. The Swedes have been drifting rightward from their social-democratic principles for years, but NATO membership will still signal abandonment of a worthy position.

As to the rest of Europe, the Ukraine crisis has made this a case of dashed hopes. We can forget about the Continent as an independent pole of power, an expectation I and others nursed over many years. The

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present generation of leadership has no experience acting other than within the shelter of the American security umbrella.

Here I have to eat a healthy serving of crow. I listened when Emmanuel Macron told the Group of 7 summit at Biarritz three years ago that Europe's destiny was bound up with Russia's, when the French president later dismissed NATO as "brain dead," when he made the case repeatedly for the need to integrate the Russian Federation into a sort of Greater Europe at the western end of the Eurasian landmass.

I have Macron down now as the AOC of Europe: Lots of posturing, garish professions of principled positions, in Macron's case his insistence over and over that Europe must cultivate its "strategic autonomy," but no seriousness. What a shyster, what an opportunist poseur. And how foolish was I.

Europe's Crucible

The Ukraine crisis proves to be Europe's crucible and Europe proves a profound disappointment. We all would have gained, not Europeans alone, had the Continent's leaders found the gumption to stand and act on their own and for their citizens' interests.

"One great difference between Cold War I and II is that the non-West is stronger now than it was. The nations that comprise it are technologically capable, they have their own markets, their own investment capital; a dense web of interdependent ties elaborates as we speak."

Policy cliques in Washington and the other Western capitals appear to have settled on our moment to circle the wagons. This is the broader context within which we ought to view the Finnish and Swedish moves toward NATO. There is no more space for outliers, no more time for fancy-pants straddling between East and West.

In my read, this is at bottom a response to the single most compelling reality of our century, the emergence of parity between the West and non-West. We hear daily of how urgent it is to shovel weapons into Ukraine as quickly as possible. And it is urgent: This is a lunge in pursuit of the West's longstanding superiority – a desperate defence of something that cannot be defended.

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now than it was. The nations that comprise it are technologically capable, they have their own markets, their own investment capital; a dense web of interdependent ties elaborates as we speak.

These nations, as is already plain from the very short list of subscribers to the Washington-directed sanctions regime, will not be drawn into Cold War II as a long list of developing nations was during Cold War I – Cuba, Iran and Guatemala above all, and from there onto Vietnam, Angola, the other Central Americans, the American satellites in East Asia – Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia.

With parity comes autonomy, to put this point another way.

The West wants to divide the world once again, and it is building high, thick walls to get this done. If we can't continue to subjugate them, the policy cliques appear to reason, let's at least isolate them. It will be interesting – bitterly amusing, even – to see who turns out to be isolated as the West insists once again the twain must not meet.

* A trillion-dollar package proposed by US President Joe Biden for 2020 to 2021 to fund social, infrastructure and environmental programmes to combat rampant inflation in the US (eds.).

Source: <https://consortiumnews.com/2022/05/16/patrick-lawrence-the-new-iron-curtain/> of 16 May 2022

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“Ethnopluralism” – the new racism is happily celebrating resurrection – not only on the far right

by Tobias Salander

Racism – banned by penal paragraphs and frowned upon in public discourse. *Tempi passati? A look at our planet shows us: Europe and the USA continue to have a blatantly one-sided, Western-fixated and mostly racially underpinned view of the world. Or where are the voices from Asia, Latin America, and Africa in our mass media? For example, on the current war in Ukraine? Kishore Mahbubani from Singapore, who was declared one of the 100 most important intellectuals of our time according to Newsweek, but also other critical thinkers, never tire of confronting the West’s colonialist and racist past. “Can Asians think?” is the title of one of Mahbubani’s books, that holds up a (post-)colonialist mirror to the West. Modern academic research on racism locates racism again and again in a new guise: “Ethnopluralism” is one of these new terms, the new hose,. However, only contains and transports the old wine of the evil classical racism based on skin colour and origin. To locate it means to reject it wholeheartedly.*

“This anti-Semite and hater of Soviet citizens should be a ‘persona non grata’ today; anything else would be a mockery of the 6 million Jews who were murdered by the Nazis in the Shoah and the 27 million citizens of the Soviet Union also murdered by the Nazis during World War II. But far from it: In the *NZZ am Sonntag* of 15 May, one reads in an article about the Ukrainian ambassador in Germany, *Andriy Melnyk*: ‘The Ukrainian partisan leader and Nazi collaborator *Stepan Bandera* is also ‘a hero’ for Melnyk. He even honoured him by laying flowers at his grave.’ And with astonishing candour, the *NZZ* journalist then admits: ‘In the public debate, however, this criticism of Melnyk hardly plays a role.’ And why not? For the same reason that artistic qualities are no longer in demand at the *Eurovision Song Contest*?”

At first glance “ethnopluralism” can easily be confused with multicultural thinking. But this is a mistake. The government-affiliated *Federal Agency for Civic Education* in Germany defines the term “ethnopluralism” for school use as follows and thus, placing it squarely with the so-called

“New Right”: “The so-called New Right uses the term ‘ethnopluralism’ to describe a theoretical concept that is supposed to give a new and less attackable foundation to the racism typically perpetuated by right-wing extremists. Critics call it ‘racism’”
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US agitation against Russians – does it fall on fertile ground in Germany? And in Russia?

ts. “The womb he crawled from is still going strong,” once the German Marxist poet *Bert Brecht* formulated his warning against the possible resurgence of the National Socialist spirit in post-war Germany. Today’s anti-Russian agitation from the United States and the United Kingdom obviously feeds not only on anti-communist and anti-Soviet reflexes in West Germany. Already in the imperialist German Reich a general anti-Slavic climate was cultivated, shaped by the All-German Association. The National Socialists were masters in agitating against the Slavs, who were dubbed subhuman and inferior subjects. *Hitler* planned the construction of huge concentration camps behind the Ural Mountains for the extermination of tens of millions of Russians. 27 million Russians were murdered by the Wehrmacht and the SS – an unimaginably large number. By comparison, the U.S. lost “only” 400,000 men to the Nazis, hardly any civilians, unlike Russia. Voices like those of the NATO and WEF woman *Florence Gaub* and a U.S.-affiliated *Inozemtsev* are also heard in Russia. What will trigger such statements? The invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and the subsequent planned physical extermination

were preceded by years of agitation, contempt and dehumanisation. What is the purpose of contempt today?

One is well advised to remember what the Russians – and many Ukrainians too! – had to suffer by the SS and the Wehrmacht. As an innocuous source, let *Wikipedia* serve: “Before the attack on the Soviet Union, several orders were issued according to which the population in the conquered territories was completely deprived of rights, including the ‘Barbarossa Decree’ of May 13, 1941, according to which collective reprisals against the civilian population were permissible, and the “Commissar Order” according to which captured political officers of the Red Army were to be shot immediately. Newsreels showed images of Russians that contemporary Germans perceived as ‘ugly, underdeveloped ... faces like monkeys, with giant noses, ragged, dirty.’

Soviet prisoners of war were grouped together in collective camps and often left to starve; of 5.7 million prisoners, 3.3 million died, mostly from hunger or disease. The Wehrmacht was expected to feed itself out of the country, and the death by starvation of the civilian population was accepted in the siege of Len-

ingrad. In the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, several hundred thousand people therefore starved to death in the winter of 1942/43. The ‘General Plan East’ adopted in 1941 envisaged the expulsion of 31 million ‘Fremdvölkische’ (foreign races) as the first stage of the Germanisation of Russia. The Slavic population was to be kept away from education and medical care and supplied only with liquor, tobacco, and contraceptives, to prevent their reproduction. Those who were able to work were often deported to the ‘Reich’ for forced labour. In internal disputes, the supporters of a policy of consistent plundering and repression, such as *Himmler*, *Göring* and the ‘Reich Commissar for Ukraine’, *Erich Koch*, prevailed in the Nazi apparatus against *Alfred Rosenberg*, who, as head of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, now pursued the goal of turning the conquered territories into satellite states. The Nazi terror drove many Slavs, who initially welcomed the Wehrmacht invasion as liberation from communism, into communist or nationalist partisan resistance.”¹

¹ <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slawenfeindlichkeit>

“The birth of geopolitical Europe”

ds. On 2 April a guest commentary in the “*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*” was published under the title “After the war of aggression: the birth of geopolitical Europe”. *Vincent-Immanuel Herr* and *Martin Speer*, two “European activists and publicists” wrote that with the attack on Ukraine on 24 February, the European order that had more or less applied since 1950 came to an end. The EU must now develop into a “values superpower” capable of defence. In their contribution, they focus on two areas in particular. These are “military and security issues” and the development of a “European sense of unity”.

“Military and security policy issues”

In order to strengthen military and security policy, it was necessary to “centralise and bundle” European foreign, security and defence policy more strongly. To this end, “national responsibility” would have to be gradually transferred to the “European level”.

The EU representative for foreign affairs must become “an EU foreign minister with extended powers”. A newly

founded “EU Foreign and Security Council” – which would “explicitly not be based on the principle of unanimity in decision-making” – should determine the “strategy and orientation”.

There was a need for an “independent European armed force” consisting of army, air force and navy as well as an integrated cyber command. It would also be conceivable to “further develop the French nuclear armament into an independent European nuclear umbrella”.

The establishment of a “common European secret service” would also be necessary..

“European sense of unity”

In order to promote a “European sense of unity”, the two authors suggest: “Introduce English as an additional official language in all EU states”: “Forms in offices or important signposts should always be available in English throughout Europe”.

In the media sector, a European platform would be useful that would make news and content from national broadcasters from all parts of the EU available on-

line and offline in different languages and thus support “the formation of a European public”. This media platform could gradually be developed into a “global news channel along the lines of the BBC or CNN” and thus develop “worldwide appeal”.

In order to promote a common cultural understanding, a “mandatory European civil or military service for all young people” would be also conceivable, which could be completed not only in the home country, but in all EU member states.

“Birth of Geopolitical Europe”

The new chapter of European unification, the two European activists who received the *Jean Monnet Prize for European Integration* in 2018, write, could turn the EU “into a geopolitically relevant, responsible and capable of defence value superpower, in whose family other European states could also be absorbed in perspective”.

But do we really need a new “values superpower”? And which states should be included in it? Switzerland too, for example? •

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ism without races.’ The word ‘ethnopluralism’ consists of the Greek word ‘ethnos’ (people) and the Latin word ‘pluralis’ (plural) and propagates a ‘diversity of peoples.’” The term originated from a certain *Henning Eichberg*, a theorist of the “New Right”. But precursors of the concept can already be found amongst the anti-Semitic and blood-and-soil ideologue of the Third Reich, *Carl Schmitt*. Ethnopluralists assumed fundamental and unchangeable “characteristics” of groups of people. Unlike classical racism, they avoided biologicistic argumentation: “Instead, they claim that peoples possess immutable cultural identities,” and that it is best if peoples live as separately as possible. The more homogeneous a people is culturally, the stronger it is. Mutual cultural influences, which have always determined people’s lives, were completely ignored. Like classical racism, ethnopluralism ultimately excludes people of other cultures and provides ideological justification for violence against them.¹

In view of the “Russophobia” staged by the media in the context of the Ukraine crisis, the question arises whether this new racism, if it is really new, cannot also be found outside the New Right. The term “New Right” would have to be defined in a precise manner and also, it would have to be determined whether the people who spoke up against massive immigration

movements, such as those in Germany in 2015, must consequentially be suspected of racism. The fact that right-wing extremism has a completely different, negative-violent “quality” and should strongly be condemned, is self-evident. Whether it appears in the guise of Western neo-Nazis or Ukrainian members of the Azov regiment is irrelevant.

“Ideological repolarisation” and “civilly saved”?

If one engages with the new term of “ethnopluralism,” the mass media offer more illustrative material than one would like. Processes that go far beyond the limits of the so-called “New Right”. Example 1: The NZZ of 5 May opens its pages to a *Vladislav L. Inozemtsev*, who is presented as the director of the Centre for Post-Industrial Studies in Moscow. The former fellow of the *German Council on Foreign Relations* in Berlin, a transatlantic think tank founded in 1955 in cooperation with the *Council on Foreign Relations* and *Chatham House*, has to put up with the question if he fulfils the facts of ethnopluralism when he states that today’s struggle of Ukraine and Russia is “not a struggle between Europe and Asia, but a struggle between the Europe of today (or tomorrow) and the Europe of yesterday”. Russia, he says, is indeed a product of Europe, “but not of the real Europe of today, but of an imaginary Europe of the past.” In other words, the product of a past and thus backward culture that is alien to us.

With Russia, Europe is confronted with the “abysses of its past.” It is questionable, however, whether it can be “ideologically reversed and civilly saved,” “as Nazi Germany once was.” Comparing Russia with Nazi Germany around 9 May, when Russians commemorated their 27 million dead, murdered by *Hitler’s* Wehrmacht and the SS – and yet the Russian president thanked the soldiers of the Western powers, who together with the Russians gave their lives in their fight against Nazi barbarism, on Red Square on the occasion of the 9 May Victory Day celebration. A barbarism, which the West had long accepted all too long with eyes wide open – keyword “appeasement” policy. And what would a real “Asian” say to Inozemtsev’s accusations? *Kishore Mahbubani*, for example? Or *Pankaj Mishra*?

Are Russians not Europeans? Do they not care about life?

Second example: What to make of the statements of one *Florence Gaub*, a NATO-affiliated member of the *Future Council on Frontier Risks* of the *World Economic Forum*? Does she not also fulfil the facts of ethnopluralism when she claimed during a talk show with *Markus Lanz* on the German mainstream channel ZDF² “that – even if Russians look European – they are not Europeans”? The Russians would have “a different relation to violence [...], a different relation to death.” The Russians,

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that includes everyone who sees themselves as culturally Russians, different from the Ukrainians and other Europeans! She continues, using age-old prejudices: “Russia, for example, also has a relatively low life expectancy. I think 70 for men. Um, that’s just... then you just deal differently with the fact that people die.” One rubs one’s eyes: the fact that Russia plummeted to the level of a Third World country in the 1990ies after the collapse of the Soviet Union “thanks to” a Western-orchestrated neoliberal “shock strategy” (*Naomi Klein*), also in terms of life expectancy, does not seem worth mentioning to the former major in the French Army. Nor does the centuries-long interweaving of Western European and Russian intellectual, economic and social history. That is the classic approach of ethnopluralism? Or can one hear the undertone of “Slavic sub humans”? “Asian steppe hordes”? To whom life is worth less than to us? The expression “Slavic subhuman” was not used, because the lady finally added that she meant it “culturally”, that the Russians only looked European, but were not. With that she confirms the definition of the federal centre for the new racism. Moreover, Gaub’s statements fulfil the dehumanisation of the enemy demanded by wartime propaganda.

Documents from Yad Vashem trampled all over

Third example: On the website of *Yad Vashem*, the Israeli memorial of the Shoah (Holocaust) and its authoritative reference centre worldwide, you can find profiles of countless racists of anti-Semitic characters. Among others, one can find the following text under the keyword “Stepan Bandera”: “*Bandera, Stepan* (1909-1959), Ukrainian nationalist leader. Bandera joined the *Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists* (OUN) in his twenties, and quickly became one of the organisation’s leaders in the western Ukraine, which was under Polish rule at the time.

During the early 1930s Bandera took control of the OUN, which encouraged armed revolt for the cause of Ukrainian independence. When the Polish Minister of the Interior was assassinated in 1936, Bandera was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. However, when the Germans invaded Poland in September 1939, he was set free by the Soviets and he moved to German-occupied Poland.

“Whether racism is justified bio-logistically or ethnopluralistically, by a ‘New Right’ or by strict transatlanticists, the human family could actually be more advanced in its development. Countries that have anti-racism paragraphs in their legislation would be well advised to include the offence of ethnopluralism, also of transatlantic provenance, and to prosecute rabble-rousers, including media that convey such content. Yet it would be even better to expand prophylactic measures against racism of all kinds. And here the model of Switzerland with its federalist state structure should be mentioned as an example, which promotes and guarantees a peaceful coexistence of people of different languages and cultures – it would only need the political will to do so!”

At the 1940 national OUN conference, Bandera caused a breach in the organisation; his supporters, the group’s majority, wanted to bring about an armed revolt. Before the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Bandera helped the Nazis set up two Ukrainian intelligence battalions within their army. He also organised units that accompanied German troops into the Ukraine to form the local government and police. Bandera and his people considered the Soviets and the Jews their main enemies.

After the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Bandera’s representatives declared the establishment of an independent Ukrainian government in LVOV on 30 June 1941. The Germans were completely opposed to this, so they deported Bandera to Sachsenhausen. He kept in contact with his comrades, and was finally released in September 1944. He led the OUN until his assassination in 1959.³

This anti-Semite and hater of Soviet citizens should be a “persona non grata” today; anything else would be a mockery of the 6 million Jews who were murdered by the Nazis in the Shoah and the 27 million citizens of the Soviet Union also murdered by the Nazis during World War II. But far from it: In the *NZZ am Sonntag* of 15 May, one reads in an article about the Ukrainian ambassador in Germany, *Andriy Melnyk*: “The Ukrainian partisan leader and Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera is also ‘a hero’ for Melnyk. He even honoured him by laying flowers at his grave.” And with astonishing candour, the *NZZ* journalist then admits, “In the public debate, however, this criticism of Melnyk hardly plays a role.” And why not? For the same reason that artistic qualities are no longer in demand at the *Eurovision Song Contest*? And the Hitler salute may be shown uncommented and go unpun-

ished? All this because Ukrainians culturally “belong to us”, Russians do not? So here, too, is racism disguised more badly than good as ethnopluralism? Are we back to the point where ethnic groups can be hated because they are ethnic groups? Who can also be deprived of their property because they belong to the ethnic group that is being ostracised? Will the right to property, a high good in a democracy, soon also be scratched and abolished when it comes to other unpopular people? Chinese, for example? Or even political dissidents? The Nazis called this “Sippenhaft,” acting openly racist.

Swiss model as a prophylaxis against racism

Whether racism is justified bio-logistically or ethnopluralistically, by a “New Right” or by strict transatlanticists, the human family could actually be more advanced in its development. Countries that have anti-racism paragraphs in their legislation would be well advised to include the offence of ethnopluralism, also of transatlantic provenance, and to prosecute rabble-rousers, including media that convey such content.

Yet it would be even better to expand prophylactic measures against racism of all kinds. And here the model of Switzerland with its federalist state structure should be mentioned as an example, which promotes and guarantees a peaceful coexistence of people of different languages and cultures – it would only need the political will to do so! •

¹ <https://www.bpb.de/themen/rechtsextremismus/dossier-rechtsextremismus/500773/ethnopluralismus/>

² Video excerpt April 2022, transmission by Markus Lanz, <https://dahemm.de/thomas-roeper-ueber-seine-reise-in-den-donbass/>

³ https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205935.pdf

“The time has come for Europe to finally draw overdue consequences and become much more independent”.

Interview of the newspaper Izvestia with Dr. h.c. Hans-Christof von Sponeck.

“More war material means that even more people will lose their lives on both sides of this asymmetrical confrontation. Media and parts of the political community are trying to push this fact aside in an irresponsible way.”

Izvestia: You have signed an open letter in which you call on the German government not to deliver heavy weapons to Kiev. In your opinion, this will only lead to a further escalation of the situation in Ukraine. Can Germany become a conflict party in this way?

Hans-Christof von Sponeck: The decision has been made. The German government, with the support of the opposition, has decided to supply heavy weapons to Ukraine. Many citizens in Germany, including myself, do not support this weighty decision. I live in a country that allows me the right to express my own opinion. I am free to express it by saying: more war material means that even more people will lose their lives on both sides of this asymmetrical confrontation. Media and parts of the political community are trying to push this fact aside in an irresponsible way. This statement has absolutely nothing to do with an assessment under international law of the effects of Russia's engagement in Ukraine. Those who question this fact are deflecting attention from the core of the matter. To say that Germany's arms deliveries have nothing to do with direct participation in the military conflict underestimates people “who have courage to use their own understanding” [dare to know]!

Olaf Scholz: Keep willingness for dialogue and channels of discussion open

On 27 February, Olaf Scholz gave a historic speech in the Bundestag in which he announced the start of arms deliveries and an increase in the defence budget. Is this a turning point in the history of modern Germany, which previously focused on peacekeeping missions?

In his speech to the Bundestag on 27 February 2022, the German Chancellor stated his attitude and that of his coalition partners to the Russian engagement in Ukraine. From the citizens' point of view, this should have happened much earlier. What was quickly branded by political opponents as the chancellor's indecisiveness is probably more related to the complexity of the unexpected ge-

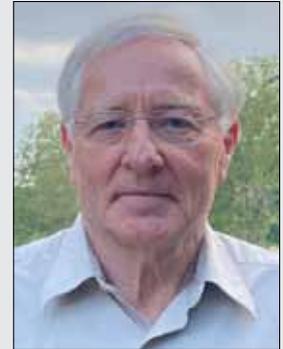
opolitical developments that have befallen the German government. Thoughtfulness is probably a better indication of the Chancellor's attitude. He is surely fully aware that there are wolves in sheep's clothing in the German political establishment, roaming Germany on the lookout for food.

The Chancellor's statement that “what is needed for the security of peace in Europe will be done by his government” is not interpreted unanimously in Germany. His pointing out that this includes showing a willingness to engage in dialogue and maintaining open channels of communication with the Russian Federation is a valuable commitment that must be honoured at various levels. To do so is not to devalue the consequences of Russia's actions in Ukraine, but an act of realpolitik that seeks to prevent further mischief on a larger scale through contact and diplomacy. This will serve peace in Europe and is reminiscent of Germany's own history. I am fully aware that this statement will be firmly rejected in some places. But that does not mean it is wrong.

Supplying arms to Ukraine – a major political earthquake

After the Second World War, a strong pacifist movement emerged in Germany. The most important representatives of this movement were the Greens. Now Annalena Baerbock is actively campaigning for the supply of heavy weapons. Why could Germany not preserve its foreign policy traditions?

Germany's new beginning after the Second World War was largely pacifist. As a people, we had learned from history and, as a member of a Western community of values, we wanted to work for a united Europe, for multilateralism and international cooperation, especially with the countries of the developing world, and for peaceful solutions to crises in accordance with the law of the UN Charter. By and large, this has been achieved. However, the annual *Munich Security Conferences* – I attended several as an observer – showed how relent-



*Hans-Christof von Sponeck
(picture ma)*

*Hans-Christof von Sponeck worked for the UN for 32 years. During this time, he worked in New York, Ghana, Pakistan, Botswana, India and was Director of the European Office of the UNDP Development Programme in Geneva. From 1998 to 2000, he was responsible for the humanitarian programme “Oil for Food” in Iraq as UN Coordinator and Assistant UN Secretary-General. In February 2000, he resigned in protest against the sanctions policy against Iraq. Hans von Sponeck has received several awards, including the *Coventry Peace Prize* of the Church of England, the *Peacemaker Award* of the *Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility* and the *Bremen Peace Prize*.*

He is currently working with Richard Falk on a book on UN reform, which will be published in 2022.

less pressure from NATO allies has been year after year to increase German participation in the Alliance's rearmament. Some of them even criticised Germany as a free rider. Nevertheless, the provision of 100 billion euros for the modernisation of the German armed forces and the increase in the defence budget for 2022 do not represent a turnaround in German foreign and security policy. They are rather a response to years of repeated internal and external criticism of the German armed forces' inability to defend themselves, and to other NATO member states' demands for more German input.

For the German public, however, the decision of the *Scholz* government in spring to after all agree to arms deliveries to Ukraine, contrary to previous election promises and government declarations, seemed like a major political earthquake. Many people are worried about their future. So far, there are no statements from

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“The time has come for Europe ...”

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the German Constitutional Court or the German Ethics Council on the legal and moral permissibility of German arms involvement for Ukraine.

How would you characterise German foreign policy today? How independent is it?

It should be noted that the re-election of Emmanuel Macron as President of France is an important event for European and German politics. Due to years of Western security policy failures, especially in the Middle East and South Asia, Europe must finally draw overdue consequences and become much more independent. Olaf Scholz’s government continues to have a partner in Paris with whom the Europeanisation of foreign and security policy can be expanded.

Sanctions demands against Russia remain without global majority

You once condemned the sanctions policy against Iraq. In general, how do you assess the results of the sanctions pressure on the Russian Federation? Can you say that they have a greater effect on average citizens?

Sanctions and the rejection of war activities are two different things. The UN General Assembly has taken a majority decision to oppose Russian action in Ukraine. The world has seen a lot of war since 1945 and is tired. I can agree with that. Attempts to find a global majority to support sanctions against Russia have completely failed. Brazil, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, South Africa and many smaller countries, including some in the Middle East, refuse to support Western demands for sanctions. The sanctions pressure on the Russian Federation does not come from the United Nations, but is a product of the governments in Washington and Canada and the EU. Instead of this sanctions ping-pong between the two sides which is currently being played out *ad absurdum*, with serious consequences for the well-being of the people, round table negotiations should be initiated as soon as possible.

Much has been written about multi-lateral sanctions policy. The 1990s became a veritable sanctions decade. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan finally concluded that the “blunt instrument” of UN sanctions had not led to any conflict solutions. Time and again, whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Sudan, Venezuela or the People’s Republic of Korea, the wrong people,

namely the citizens, had become the victims. The permanent members of the UN Security Council have at no time been able to implement political and economic sanctions with real protection for the citizens. The 1945 promise of *Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill* at Yalta to guard world peace as a team was forgotten. In the end, nation-state self-interest was more important.

Iraq 1998: “Regime change” in Baghdad instead of humanitarian aid

In February 2000, you resigned as head of the Oil-for-Food Programme in protest against the UN sanctions against Iraq. Now the EU is preparing for an embargo on Russian oil, the EU states are trying to reject gas from Russia. How sensible is that in your opinion?

As head of the Oil-for-Food Programme (the UN’s humanitarian programme), I saw on a daily basis how sanctions could affect Iraq. We tried to help the people of Iraq nonetheless with a totally and deliberately underfunded “humanitarian” programme, with the continuous support of the ambassadors of China, France and Russia in Baghdad and in New York. Russia’s Foreign Minister *Sergey Lavrov*, at the time Russia’s ambassador to the UN in New York, will perhaps remember the helpful discussions we had during my visits to New York about the devastating human conditions in Iraq. The governments in Washington and London were concerned about weapons of mass destruction that no longer existed, as US Ambassador *John Negroponte* testified before a US Senate committee on 7 April 2004. The humanitarian programme was obviously secondary. As the US Congress confirmed in October 1998 through the so-called *Iraq Liberation Act*, it was all about “regime change” in Baghdad.

I would like to add that sanctions against Iraq or any other country have never resulted in anyone being held responsible for the actions that caused them. It was these circumstances that finally convinced me that resigning my responsibility in Baghdad was the only choice left to me.

UN Contribution to the resolution of the Ukraine conflict

In one of your interviews, you said that the pro-Western course of the UN had led to several large military operations in which there were many victims. How do you assess the work of the UN in resolving the conflict in Ukraine?

In the major crises of the last decades, for example in the Middle East, the Balkans and South Asia, the political UN,

i.e., the Security Council, has shown time and again that it has not been able to facilitate conflict solutions true to its mandate. This is a harsh judgement, but one that can be substantiated in detail.

It is obvious that this also applies to the current situation in Ukraine. Secretary-General *Guterres*’ reluctance to commit himself further than only rhetorically to de-escalation, has been met with incomprehension worldwide. What was expected of him was dynamic commuter diplomacy with full use of the moral authority that a UN Secretary-General possesses. In an appeal on 18 April, more than 300 high-ranking former UN staff members called on him to fulfil his obligations. The Secretary-General travelled to Moscow and Kiev shortly afterwards. The result: the UN was allowed, together with the ICRC, to set up humanitarian corridors to help people leave Mariupol. That is a success.

Guterres must understand that this could all have happened earlier. The lesson must be to continue such efforts on his part with both sides without interruption now. The priority is unquestionably the expansion of humanitarian aid to Ukraine by the UN.

“There is no alternative to peace”

At present, there are more and more statements about the risks of a nuclear conflict. What could and can Western countries do to avoid plunging the world into a third world war?

A new European security concept is urgently needed. Secretary General *Guterres*, as a bridge builder between conflicting parties, must take advantage of his role and present to the Security Council the urgency of convening an international conference on European security before the end of the year. It would be irresponsible to trivialise the possibility of nuclear conflict.

And finally, I would like to add something more. For Germany, 8 May is a day of remembrance, a day of liberation. For Russia, 9 May is the day of the end of the Great Patriotic War. As a young person, I experienced this terrible war and have not forgotten it. I reach out to my peers in Russia and Ukraine in the hope that together we can say to the new generations in our countries: Do better than we did. There is no alternative to peace. •

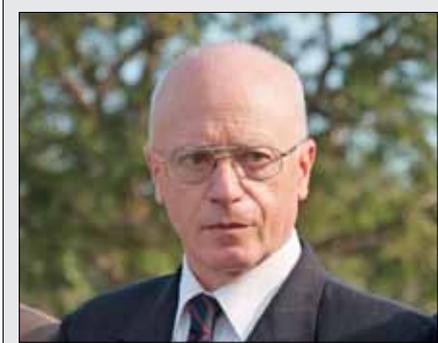
Source: German original of the interview published by the Russian newspaper *Izvestia* on 11 May 2022 in Russian translation (<https://iz.ru/1331166/mariia-vaseliva/nado-srochno-vyrabotat-novuiu-kontseptciiu-evropeiskoi-bezopasnosti>).

(Translation *Current Concerns*)

The role of culture in establishing dialogue and cooperation in post-conflict situations

Speech at the International Conference “Advancing a Post-conflict Humanitarian Agenda” in Shusha, Azerbaijan

by Professor Dr Dr h.c. mult. Hans Köchler



Hans Köchler
(picture hanskoechler.com)

Hans Köchler (*1948) is emeritus professor of philosophy. From 1990 until 2008 he served as Chairman of the *Department of Philosophy* at the University of Innsbruck (Austria). Köchler's research interests include legal and political philosophy, hermeneutics, and philosophical anthropology. As co-founder and president (since 1972) of the *International Progress Organization* (Vienna), he has committed himself to the causes of peace and inter-cultural dialogue. This has been evident in numerous publications and lectures all around the globe, as well as in his engagement in many international organizations. Köchler served in committees and expert groups on international democracy, human rights, culture, and development. In 2019 he was appointed as member of the University Council of the *University of Digital Science* (Berlin). Since 2018 he has taught at the *Academy for Cultural Diplomacy* in Berlin. Hans Köchler lives in Vienna.

Culture embodies the “life-world” of a community, a people, a nation, in the most genuine sense. It includes not only the domains of religion, classical arts, literature, and the search of scientific knowledge, but also popular traditions and sports. Culture shapes and expresses collective as well as individual *identity* – especially, but not exclusively, in relation to language. In our global, interconnected world, culture has become an element of *diversity* that has the dual potential to *divide* and *unite*, depending on the circumstances.

In *times of war and conflict*, adversaries tend to use issues of cultural identity to create stereotypes of “the other” as enemy. In this mindset, diversity is per-

ceived as a threat. One's own culture is considered superior; it is seen as the epitome of national identity and may even become the focal point of chauvinist self-assertion. Thus, in war, culture is easily politicized; artists, authors, musicians, or sportspeople are excluded from international competitions just because they happen to be from the “wrong” side (country). However, the abuse of culture for purposes of war mobilization could not be further from its real nature: In the multitude of “life- worlds,” with an almost infinite diversity of approaches, “culture” is the expression of how humanity has perceived, interpreted, or adorned reality through all of history.

In *post-conflict situations*, it is this *universal* aspect of culture that can bring people together in a joint effort. Whether it is enthusiasm for music or the arts, the search of knowledge or perfection in a particular field, or the “love of the game”: culture transcends all borders – whether political, geographic or mental – and allows people to discover their humanity. Shared cultural interests can become a common denominator that allows people to break down barriers previously considered insurmountable. A most encouraging example of the “dialogical power” of culture is the *West-Eastern Divan Orchestra* (consisting of an equal number of Israeli and Arab musicians) that has been designated by the United Nations as “UN Global Advocate for Cultural Understanding.” Having listened to yesterday's brilliant performance of the Baku Chamber Orchestra, I would also like to emphasize the great potential of the Pan-Caucasian Youth Orchestra. It includes talented young musicians from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, and Georgia. Other, more mundane examples of the dialogical power of culture relate to the role of sports, as in the case of the so-called “ping-pong diplomacy” between the United States and China in 1971, which preceded the establishment of diplomatic relations among the two countries.

Genuine interest in, and respect for, each other's culture – or “life-world” – is indispensable in any effort to rebuild trust and overcome political prejudice that may

have become entrenched over long periods of conflict. State and civil society should make use of the many opportunities, whether in the fields of art, philosophy, scientific research or popular culture and sports. Meetings among philosophers may also have a positive impact.

On this special occasion, here in Shusha, I would like to recall the earlier initiative of *Felsefe Dünyası* (“World of Philosophy”), an East-West Research Center that originated in Azerbaijan, with the encouragement of then President Heydar Aliyev, himself a true friend of philosophy. Asking the big questions concerning the origin of life and the essence of Being, philosophy is indeed *universal*; it has a genuine transcultural dimension, appealing to and unifying all humankind beyond ethnic, cultural and political borderlines. I do remember the lively debates among philosophers from all corners of the globe, organized by that center in Baku, and I hope that one can build on its legacy – especially in a post-conflict scenario like the one we discuss here, in Shusha, where Muslim and Christian communities have lived together for hundreds of years.

Also, in situations after major conflict, projects of inter-religious dialogue can have special significance. In the words of the late Heydar Aliyev – and in the “spirit of Shusha” – one may confidently say: “Of all moral riches of humanity, religion's distinguished feature is that it has always called people to friendship, solidarity and unity regardless of their [religious] affiliation.”

In conclusion: A polity that values cultural diversity and respects the cultural identity of “the other,” even the former adversary, will not only gain in international standing, but will also be able to make its position more secure among the community of nations. In view of an increasingly fragile international order, *dialogue of cultures and civilizations* remains one of the cornerstones of sustainable peace – domestically, regionally, and at global level.

Thank you for your attention. •

Source: *International Conference “Advancing a Post-conflict Humanitarian Agenda”* in Shusha, Karabakh Mountains, Azerbaijan. Transcript of the speech delivered at the 1st plenary session on 19 May 2022.

Bringing back to fruition Europe's human and common good-oriented cultural substance

by Karl-Jürgen Müller

The Western claim that Russia attacked Ukraine “without provocation” does not hold up on closer inspection. Rather, the US government and NATO have conjured up this “proxy war” (“down to the last Ukrainian”) against Russia with long advance planning. Even if the local propaganda roller constantly wants us to believe the opposite – a peace-loving West against an aggressive Russia.

Most European governments are also taking part in this proxy war. Not only those of the European member states of NATO and the EU, but also previously neutral states like Switzerland have bowed to the massive pressure – if they are not acting out of their own conviction.

None of those responsible yet wants to admit publicly that this policy is a dead end. This makes the demand for an independent European path all the more important – not as a power-political variant to US policy, but as a peace-political way out on the basis of Europe's human and common good-oriented cultural substance.

“War of Civilisations”

In his contribution to *Current Concerns* (No. 11 of 24 May 2022), *Guy Mettan* said that the war in Ukraine not only had a regional dimension, but was also a “war of civilisations”. It was a “war of individualism and abstract values against a more traditional and humanistic vision of human society”, of a “so-called progressive morality” against a worldview “more concerned with respecting the heritage of ancient Greek, Latin and Christian humanism”.

On 21 October 2021, Russian President *Vladimir Putin* had given a fundamental lecture on the values important to Russia, which was also published in this journal (“The importance of a solid, value-based foundation. Values in today's Russia and the radical change in values in the West”, No. 24, 11 November 2021). It was already noticeable in this speech that the Russian president had not delivered anything specifically Russian, but reminded us of foundations and values that are constitutive of what can also be called the European system of values.

Henry Kissinger was right when he pointed out at this year's *World Economic Forum* (WEF) in Davos that Russia, for 400 years, had a determining influence on Europe's destiny.

2015: “Manifesto for Europe”

Almost seven years ago, the annual conference of the “European Working Group

‘Mut zur Ethik’ adopted a final declaration (also published in *Current Concerns* (No. 24 of 23 September 2015) recalling the European system of values. This “Manifesto for Europe” expressed the great concern of the conference participants about an ever-increasing erosion of the European substance of values. Already seven years ago they stated:

“Side by side with the US and in an almost slave-like allegiance the governments of EU-states and NATO have been breaking international law for many years. [...] The 1999 War against Yugoslavia was the Fall. [...] In 2004, as well as in 2013 and 2014 the US, together with the EU, massively interfered in the internal affairs of the Ukraine and contributed to a war being waged in that region – in the heart of Europe.”

Europe's cultural heritage

The Conference contrasted this with “Europe's cultural heritage” and reminded:

“Europe's history is a history of injustice and violence, but it is as well a history of overcoming the latter evils from its own moral insight and political strength. The Western and Christian humanist tradition has developed viable foundations for equality before the law, humanness and respect for human dignity. Whenever in history these basics could wield their influence, human coexistence has been peaceful, just and secure.”

And:

“Europe is characterised by a rich diversity of cultures and nations in a small space, from Crete to the North Cape, from Lisbon to Yekaterinburg. People across Europe have contributed much in all spheres of life in more than 2,500 years. For the people's coexistence in peace and freedom, the development of law and right towards ever greater justice was of fundamental importance for Europe and the world. Europe has significantly contributed to the fact that human rights and the principles of international law are today guaranteed in international agreements (Charter of the United Nations, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural

Rights) and in national constitutions.”

Good faith

Participants of the Conference also stated:

“Good faith must be the basis of all human coexistence and political activity again. Without this principle, there is no confidence in agreements within and between the states, and the floodgates are open to arbitrariness. Control mechanisms (such as “governance”) and manipulation techniques of all kinds, which aim at influencing people by the abuse of psychological methods without full and open information, deprive the citizens of the possibility of independently forming their opinion. Thus, they violate the dignity of the person and destroy the basis of political dialogue and the legal system.”

In contrast, it was said:

“People are capable, with their reason and their empathy, to recognise the necessary fundamental orientation of a moral and political action, to think and feel in a humane and social way, and to learn to act accordingly. This is the disposition embedded in the human heart. Guided by reason and conscience, these fundamental orientations are intended to form the basis of the whole of the moral, legal and political determinations that guide the life of man and society. They guarantee the dignity of the human person in the face of transitory ideologies.”

Important voices for an independent Europe

In the past seven years, the Europe of NATO and the EU has moved even further away from all this. It is therefore very important that books keep appearing that call for a separate European path, independent and autonomous from the previous US hegemony and its guidelines for Europe. At this point, we can only refer to three very readable German-language publications: “Ami go home! Eine Neuvermessung der Welt” (A remeasurement of the world) by *Stefan Baron* from 2021, “Die scheinheilige Supermacht. Warum wir aus dem Schatten der USA heraustreten müssen” (The hypocritical super-power. Why we need to step out of the shadow of the USA)

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Neutrality is a precious commodity – let us keep it

Swiss neutrality law and policy must not be allowed to sink into the din of war

by Dr iur. Marianne Wüthrich

In *Current Concerns* of 10 and 24 May, it has already been reported that the Swiss Federal Council had jettisoned the neutrality policy it had built up over centuries virtually overnight and decided on the 1:1 adoption of EU sanctions against the Russian state as well as against private assets. In doing so, the Federal Council has “caused a lot of damage”, said Federal Councillor Ueli Maurer in a newspaper interview.

The “damage” continues to expand. In the meantime, we are already talking about “closer cooperation” with NATO beyond the *Partnership for Peace* (PfP) (demanded by FDP President *Thierry Burkart*, in agreement with *Viola Amherd*, Head of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport, DDPS, as well as about arms deliveries to the war state Ukraine.

Clear legal situation

Everyone, at least in NATO countries, has understood that Switzerland, as a neutral country, is not allowed to sell weapons directly to a warring party. Currently, however, Germany and Denmark have asked the Federal Council whether they are allowed to deliver war material purchased in Switzerland to Ukraine. The legal situation is clear: they are not. This is because, firstly, the law of neutrality requires that Switzerland would have to treat Russia in the same way as Ukraine in the event of a request, and secondly, Switzerland has a strict *War Material Act* (WMA). Not only does it prohibit the direct export of military equipment to warring countries, but Switzerland also requires a declaration by the government concerned that war material will not be re-exported (KMG

Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin counters

mw. The head of the Department of Economic Affairs, *Guy Parmelin*, is certainly not to blame for the un-neutrality-related wavering within the Federal Council. He also seems to oppose economic sanctions. Current example: Question by the currently very active Centre president *Gerhard Pfister* on 7 June in the National Council regarding the Eurochem company in Zug, in which a Russian citizen has a stake: “Is the Federal Council working on making it no longer possible to circumvent sanctions via close family members?”

Answer Guy Parmelin: “The Zug-based company Eurochem must comply with Swiss measures and has undertaken to do so. Thus, it is prohibited from making assets or economic resources available to Mr *Andrey Melnichenko*, either directly or indirectly, for example through his wife.” Parmelin referred, as

he should, to the rule of law: “In Switzerland, the family members of a sanctioned person are not automatically subjected to the same measures directed against their relatives.” And he drew attention to the self-goal that we Europeans are shooting with the anti-Russian sanctions: “Eurochem is one of the world’s largest manufacturers and distributors of fertilisers. To prohibit the company from continuing its business, even though it is in line with Swiss sanctions, would further undermine the global food supply. This is in no way in Switzerland’s interest.” At least someone is saying it!

Source: “Question Pfister Gerhard. 22.7352 War in Ukraine. Circumvention of sanctions”. Question Time on 7 June 2022 in the National Council
(Translation *Current Concerns*)

Art. 18 para. 1). Denmark and Germany signed such declarations at the time. On the basis of Swiss law, the *State Secretariat for Economic Affairs* (SECO) rejected Germany’s application in April and Denmark’s in May.

Pressure from NATO-foreign countries is one thing ...

As the editors of the “*Tages-Anzeiger*” found out from a “confidential Federal Council paper” (!), in Davos, in addition to NATO Secretary General *Stoltenberg*, a number of defence ministers tried to persuade the head of the DDPS, Federal Councillor *Viola Amherd*, not to be so strict with Swiss legislation. Even US Deputy Secretary of Defence *Kathleen H. Hicks* paid her respects.¹ One sometimes

wonders why an increasing number of Western countries are appointing women without any military experience as ministers of defence – perhaps we have the answer here: It is probably relatively easy for officers and chiefs of staff in their own country as well as for NATO generals to “get their ideas across”, to put it diplomatically, to people such as a former advocate and member of the board of *Migros Valais* with zero days of service in the Swiss army.

... the docility of the DDPS is another

In any case, the NATO representatives were successful with Federal Councillor *Amherd*: on 3 June, the DDPS on its own initiative gave the green light for another
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“Bringing back to fruition ...”

continued from page 10

by *Michael Lüders* from 2021 and “*Nationale Interessen. Orientierung für deutsche und europäische Politik in Zeiten globaler Umbrüche*” (National interests. Orientation for German and European Politics in Times of Global Upheaval) by *Klaus von Dohnanyi* from 2022.

Even in the mainstream media, which are currently almost forced into line, the reader finds valuable exceptions from time to time. For example, the article “*In der Ukraine sollte die EU nicht den USA folgen, sondern nach Frieden streben*” (“In Ukraine, the EU should not follow the USA, but strive for peace”) in the “*Berliner Zeitung*” of 28 May 2022. The author

is *Michael von der Schulenburg*, a former senior German diplomat at the OSCE and the United Nations.

Hoping for the EU would be an illusion

The path towards an independent Europe, a Europe that recalls its historical roots, its human-oriented cultural and state political substance and thus contributes to peace in Europe, will not be easy. Christianity, humanism and the Enlightenment certainly belong to this substance. But culture always also means cultural development. Europe has always made progress when it has opened its doors to other cultures and their achievements for the benefit of mankind. The exchange, the dialogue of cultures is indispensable.

Such a “renaissance” would most likely be unrealistic if one wanted to rely on the structures of today’s European Union. These structures and this entity are also an art product with strong US-American influences, much stronger than in the various European nation states, which still have remnants of their historical and cultural identity. The EU lacks liberal and democratic, historical and humane substance. A metamorphosis towards an adequate instrument of European autonomy is probably an illusion.

All the more important are the citizens of all European countries. They will be crucial in bringing Europe’s substance back to fruition. ●

"Neutrality is a precious commodity ..."

continued from page 11

er request by Germany, namely the export of former Swiss battle tanks which Switzerland "no longer needed" (Did we really no longer need them?) and had therefore sold back to the German manufacturer *Rheinmetall* 11 years ago. The approval of the "transfer of surplus material from former or current stocks of the Armed Forces" did not fall under the *War Material Act* and lay within the sole competence of the DDPS, the Department said in its media release of 3 June 2022. Well, from a legal point of view, that does make some sense: Switzerland probably had to be happy that *Rheinmetall* bought back the "surplus" tanks at a discount (at the expense of Swiss taxpayers and the security of the population), so they couldn't impose any more conditions.

At the same time, the DDPS rejected a second request from the Polish government to buy decommissioned tanks from the Swiss army, because such a deal would have to be approved by parliament and the procedure in Switzerland would take some time.

The real bombshell, however, is the third decision of the head of the DDPS and her entourage to hand over to Great Britain multi-role weapons of the type NLAW ordered from *Saab* in Sweden, which were to have been delivered to Switzerland in 2022/23. Following the delivery of similar weapons to Ukraine, the UK wants to increase its own stocks. At the request of London, the DDPS is now generously "letting Great Britain go first", and we will wait until the end of 2024 for the deliveries to which we are legitimately entitled. The DDPS vividly describes what such weapons can be used for by the Ukrainians in the Donbass: they "serve to engage enemy tanks, armoured personnel carriers (APC's) and other vehicles at medium and long ranges, as well as to breach fortified enemy positions or buildings to enable friendly forces to penetrate".²

Such processes in Switzerland – which is neutral by law! – must deeply repulse and alarm every humanly feeling contemporary: The unspeakable profiteering in the Western "world of values", a shifting around of lethal weapons with the highest prospects of profit – like on a Monopoly board – which literally goes over corpses, over tens of thousands of corpses! And this is where Switzerland is supposed to join in and take part?

Not all Federal Councillors falter

The *State Secretariat for Economic Affairs* (SECO), which rejected the German and Danish requests mentioned at the beginning, is part of the *Federal*

"Everyone, at least in NATO countries, has understood that Switzerland, as a neutral country, is not allowed to sell weapons directly to a warring party. Currently, however, Germany and Denmark have asked the Federal Council whether they are allowed to deliver war material purchased in Switzerland to Ukraine. The legal situation is clear: they are not. This is because, firstly, the law of neutrality requires that Switzerland would have to treat Russia in the same way as Ukraine in the event of a request, and secondly, Switzerland has a strict War Material Act (WMA)."

Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research (EAER), headed by Federal Councillor *Guy Parmelin*. He did not let himself be put off by his Council colleague's pandering to the opinion-makers at the WEF, nor by the insistence of the German and Danish governments on a licence for the re-export of tank ammunition and wheeled armoured infantry fighting vehicles respectively, but sought the support of his colleagues in the Federal Council. German Vice-Chancellor *Robert Habeck* told the Bundesrat at the WEF that Germany had also ruled out arms exports to warring countries before the Russian attack on Ukraine. He and his party, the Greens, have now changed their mind: "We have to measure our own stance against reality", says Habeck.³ In fact, the party cadres of the German Greens measure their stance "against reality" insofar as they adapt it to the mainstream every now and then.

On 3 June, the Federal Council as a whole confirmed the SECO's decisions in no uncertain terms, despite all attempts at pressure: "According to the *War Material Act*, exports of war material are to be rejected if the country of destination is involved in an international armed conflict. Russia and Ukraine are in such a conflict. Since exports from Switzerland to Ukraine cannot be approved on the basis of the neutrality principle and the *War Material Act*, approval for the transfer of Swiss war material by Germany and Denmark to Ukraine is also not possible."⁴ In the same decision, however, the Federal Council approved the applications of two Swiss companies that wanted to supply individual parts and assemblies to defence companies in Germany and Italy. According to Federal Council practice, this is possible up to a certain proportion of the end product. So, a bit of compromise policy after all ...

Own team against Switzerland: attempted dismantling of the state system from within

It doesn't knock it out of the park: The small state of Switzerland can better cope with the insolence of a Kathleen H. Hicks from the USA or a Robert Habeck from our northern neighbour if our own team remembers that we have a unique counter-model to defend. Unfortunately, the Swiss mainstream media and some top politicians are not fulfilling this task in any way. The good news is that there are also politicians who insist on respecting neutrality and the law.

Some examples of the dismantling clique

- Councillor of States Thierry Burkart, President of the Free Democratic Party, wants to write into the *War Material Act* (KMG) that the re-export of Swiss war material should be permitted by "democratic constitutional states". The same politician also calls for "closer cooperation with NATO". This fits together well: By "democratic states under the rule of law" Burkart means the EU/NATO states, which could then resupply Swiss weapons to all wars of the USA and its satellites.
- *Tamedia* editor-in-chief *Arthur Rutishauser*: In his opinion, Switzerland's deal with the UK and the *Saab* company "can hardly be reconciled with what is commonly understood by neutrality." He is right about that – but instead of insisting on compliance with the neutrality requirement, he points to the expectation of "friendly nations" that Switzerland "declares solidarity with Europe, at least in part". This is why Rutishauser sympathises with Burkart's amendment to the KMG, although he admits: "Of course, such an arrangement would run the risk of cir-

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Perpetual neutrality applies especially in difficult times: The Austrians show the way

mw. On 15 May 1955, Austria became a sovereign state with the “State Treaty concerning the Restoration of an Independent and Democratic Austria”. On 26 October 1955, the National Council passed the “Federal Constitutional Law on the Neutrality of Austria” (Neutrality Law), thus subjecting the country to the 1907 *Hague Convention* (right to inviolability of territory; duty not to support any party, supply or finance arms in the event of war).¹ However, Austria did not agree to perpetual neutrality along the lines of Switzerland only because the Allies demanded it. Rather, the population stood behind the principle of neutrality then and still does today. This is evidenced by the high level of support for neutrality among the population and politicians across the party spectrum.

Unlike Switzerland, Austria has been a member of the EU since 1995 and therefore cannot opt out of economic sanctions imposed by the Union. By joining the EU, Austria has also declared its willingness to participate in the common foreign and security policy. But in the Ukraine war, Austria adheres to the law of neutrality and does not supply war material, just like neutral Ireland.

Only 14 per cent of the Austrian population are in favour of joining NATO!

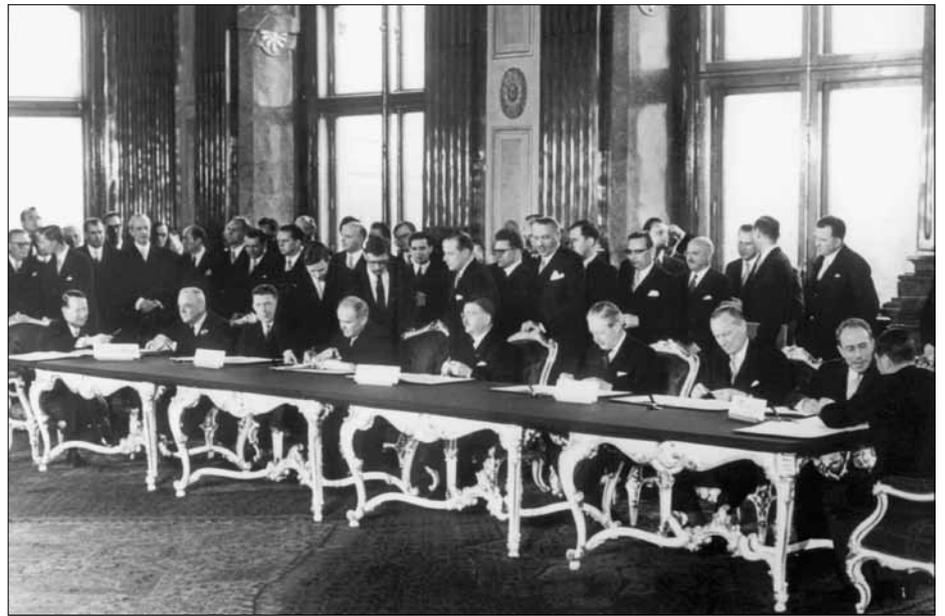
While Sweden and Finland are considering joining NATO, the Austrians remain undeterred in their neutrality: In a survey conducted at the beginning of May², only 14 per cent of those questioned were in favour of joining NATO, 75 per cent explicitly rejected it. In another survey of March 2022 about the importance of neutrality, “a total of 91 per cent of respondents stated that Austria’s neutrality was important to them, even against the background of the Russia-Ukraine war. Only [...] 6 per cent, on the other hand, did not consider it important”.³

More cooperation of the EU member states in security and defence policy is advocated by 83 per cent of the respondents, but only 37 per cent want Austria to participate in an EU defence alliance.⁴

From these survey results, one can conclude that the majority of the population would rather support the strengthening of an independent European security policy outside NATO, with a willingness to cooperate but not to join an EU army. In this way, neutrality can be preserved as much as possible within the EU.

Comparison with the Swiss population

According to a poll conducted by *sotomo* in the *SonntagsBlick* in April, 35 per



Signing the State Treaty by the foreign ministers of the US, France, Great Britain, Soviet Union and Austria on 15 May 1955. (picture keystone)

cent of respondents answered “yes” to the question: “Should Switzerland cooperate more closely with the NATO defence alliance?” while 21 per cent answered “rather yes”. However, “cooperate more closely” is a very unclear formulation. Wisely, there was no mention of joining NATO - apparently “Blick” wanted to avoid the expected resounding “no”. On the question “Should Switzerland supply weapons to Ukraine?”, the Swiss clearly showed that they want to stick to neutrality: 56 per cent answered no, 10 per cent rather no, which is a two-thirds majority.⁵

Politicians take a stand: “Austria’s neutrality is part of our national identity”

While Swiss Federal Councillors and parliamentarians are lamentably divided on the future direction of their own security policy, Austria’s top politicians across the party landscape are clearly in favour of maintaining neutrality.

After Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership, the question of whether neutrality is still the best security instrument for Austria was also raised in Austria.

- Federal Chancellor *Karl Nehammer* (ÖVP): “Austria was neutral, is neutral and will remain neutral.” On joining NATO: “For Austria this question does not arise in this way, we also have a different history than Sweden and Finland.” (*www.heute.at* of 17 May 2022)
- Foreign Minister *Alexander Schallenberg* (ÖVP): “Austria’s military neutrality is anchored in our constitution. Since regaining sovereignty after the

war, it has been part of our national identity. Vienna will always be a capital of dialogue.” Schallenberg added: “We participate in European security policy, but joining NATO is not up for discussion, and the Austrian people strongly support neutrality. In a world where conflicts have become more open on an economic, military and intellectual level, neutrality can be a value again.”⁶

- Environment Minister *Leonore Gewessler* and other Green politicians also reject Austria’s joining NATO: Austria is a neutral country and actively lives this neutrality, said Gewessler. Some Green politicians added that “Austria should get more involved in other areas so as not to be seen as a security policy free rider at NATO”.⁷

Note: In Switzerland, “free rider” is also a favourite word of some security politicians. As if the active foreign policy role that Austria and Switzerland take on – and could take on much more, especially today – had any less significance for the peaceful coexistence of peoples than joint shooting exercises!

- Along these lines, FPÖ federal party leader *Herbert Kickl*: “As a neutral state, Austria has been able to act as a mediator in many conflicts over the past decades or has been a venue for negotiations.” Kickl recalls Austria’s legal obligation to neutrality: “Joining a military alliance is already not possible under the Austrian Feder-

"Neutrality is a precious commodity ..."

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cumventing the Swiss Arms Export Law, but at least this would not be actively controlled by Switzerland, as in the case of the [Saab-ordered] anti-tank weapons."⁵ Words fail the reader!

– *Tiana Moser*, parliamentary group leader of the Green Liberals, demands a change of course from the Federal Council because, after all, it is not a question of direct arms exports but of weapons that Switzerland has already sold to "friendly democracies": "These weapons would be passed on to a country that is defending itself against an aggressor"⁶

Some politicians of the "Centre Party", to which Federal Councillor Viola Amherd also belongs, are particularly eager to gnaw away at the neutral and direct-democratic Swiss model – in the hope of gaining a few voter percentages?

– Centre member of the Council of States *Pirmin Bischof*, President of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Council of States: "The Federal Council should now take action and correct its practice." (*SRF News* of 1 June 2022)

Without a legal basis?**No, by means of emergency law!**

– This is what centre party president *Gerhard Pfister* said: He called the blocking of arms deliveries "indecent" and tweeted already on 24 April: "BR [Federal Council] has in my opinion competence to allow [Germany] to deliver to [Ukraine] if in national interest. (Art 1 para 2 Embargo Act). The latter seems to me to be given here, if [Switzerland] helps a European democracy to defend itself. BR is responsible for this failure to help [Ukraine]." (<https://twitter.com/gerhardpfister/>)

Counter-attack by neutrality-preserving and pacifist Swiss forces

The "Federal Law on War Material" was revised or rather tightened only a few months ago, on 1 October 2021, as an in-

direct counter-proposal to the popular initiative "Against arms exports to civil war countries". The Federal Council had included a clause in the draft with which it wanted to give itself the authority to "deviate from the licensing criteria in exceptional circumstances in order to safeguard the country's foreign or security policy interests." The Council of States deleted this clause, not only with the votes of the SP (Social Democratic Party) and the Greens, but also, strangely enough, with the large majority of the Centre party as the tipping point. The National Council, which initially wanted to cling to the exceptional regulation, finally gave in to allow the popular initiative to be withdrawn. Result: The exceptional competence that Gerhard Pfister wants to give the Federal Council today was rejected by both Councils on 1 October 2021, which means that the tightened War Material Act was adopted. In the National Council, by the way, with 27 of 30 centre votes, including the vote of Pfister himself.⁷

Even if the memory of some centre politicians is apparently very short, there is still hope. For Pfister's parliamentary group "does not follow its leader unconditionally", according to the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 3 June. The Swiss Greens are obviously made of different stuff than their German colleagues: In addition to the SVP (Swiss Popular Party), which has always stood up for the adherence of neutrality, the president of the Green Party, *Balthasar Glättli*, also warns against a change of direction with regard to arms exports: "The previous practice is broadly supported. The Federal Council must not simply abandon it behind the scenes without consulting parliament."⁸ And the Zurich SP National Councillor *Min Li Marti* stated on 27 April that the supply of war material to warring countries "violates the War Material Act and the law of neutrality". If, in view of the war in Ukraine, Swiss neutrality is to be called into question, "then this would have to be discussed in principle, it is not a matter of exceptional provisions, but concerns the core of neutrality".⁹

Here the circle closes, because this corresponds analogously to the statement of SVP National Councillor *Franz Grüter* in an interview with *Current Concerns*: "The neutrality question goes so deep into the DNA of our country that we have to have the discussion – we have to have it! So much has happened, with the sanctions that have been taken, with the efforts to join NATO or move closer to it, with membership of the UN Security Council. But I think we need to have this discussion when the dust has settled a little, when we can talk about these issues from a certain distance."¹⁰

¹ Gafner, Beni; Knellwolf, Thomas. "Geheimpapier zu Kriegsmaterial-Export. Nach Druck aus dem Ausland ermöglicht der Bundesrat Waffenlieferungen" (Secret paper on war material export. After pressure from abroad, the Federal Council allows arms deliveries). In: *Tages-Anzeiger* of 3 June 2022

² "Entscheide zu Material aus früheren und aktuellen Beständen der Armee" (Decisions on material from previous and current armed forces stocks). *Media release* of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport of 3 June 2022.

³ Meier, Dominik. "Waffen für die Ukraine. Schweiz blockiert Panzer für Ukraine" (Weapons for Ukraine. Switzerland blocks tanks for Ukraine). *SRF News* of 1 June 2022

⁴ "Ukraine: Bundesrat hat verschiedene Kriegsmaterial-Geschäfte beurteilt" (Ukraine: Federal Council has assessed various war material transactions). *Federal Council media release* of 3 June 2022

⁵ Rutishauser, Arthur. "Leitartikel zum Ukraine-Krieg. Die Schweiz muss ihre Haltung zu Waffenlieferungen ändern" (Editorial on the Ukraine war. Switzerland must change its stance on arms deliveries). In: *Sonntagszeitung* of 5 June 2022

⁶ Meier, Dominik. "Waffen für die Ukraine. Schweiz blockiert Panzer für Ukraine" (Weapons for Ukraine. Switzerland blocks tanks for Ukraine). *SRF News* of 1 June 2022

⁷ <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/amtliches-bulletin/amtliches-bulletin-die-verhandlungen?SubjectId=54661>

⁸ Meier, Dominik. "Waffen für die Ukraine. Schweiz blockiert Panzer für Ukraine" (Weapons for Ukraine. Switzerland blocks tanks for Ukraine). *SRF News* of 1 June 2022

⁹ Pereiro, Miguel. "Ukraine Krieg: Breite Allianz gegen Schweizer Waffenlieferungen". (Ukraine war: broad alliance against Swiss arms deliveries). In: *Nau.ch* of 27 April 2022

¹⁰ "Let us return to the importance of neutrality. Interview with National Councillor Franz Grüter, President of the Foreign Policy Committee of the National Council". In: *Current Concerns* of 24 May 2022

"Perpetual neutrality applies ..."

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al Constitution – and that is a good thing."⁸

– *Pamela Rendi-Wagner*, Chairperson of the SPÖ: "Our active neutrality policy with a strong international commitment to peace has proven its worth. Neutrality is not up for discussion for us." On the occasion of her visit to the German Chancellor *Olaf Scholz* in mid-May, Rendi-Wagner spoke out in favour of intensified efforts in the sense of de-escalation in the Ukraine war: "As difficult as the situation is, Europe must leave no stone unturned to

bring Ukraine and Russia to the negotiating table and find diplomatic solutions." The question of how to end this war must be brought back to the centre, said Rendi-Wagner.⁹

¹ Republic of Austria, Parliament. "Was macht die österreichische Neutralität aus?" (What constitutes Austrian neutrality?) Fachinfos of 21 March 2022

² The survey was conducted by the Institute for Demoscopy & Data Analysis (IFDD) on behalf of the Austria Press Agency APA.

³ Mohr, Martin. "Wichtigkeit der Neutralität in Österreich 2022" (Importance of neutrality in Austria 2022). In: *statista*, 14 March 2022.

⁴ "Ukraine-Krieg: Österreicherinnen und Österreicher laut Umfrage gegen Nato-Beitritt" (Ukraine war: Austrians against Nato accession according to survey). In: *Der Standard* of 6 May 2022 (APA).

⁵ Rafi, Reza. "So denkt die Schweiz über Krieg und Neutralität. Das Volk will aufrüsten" (This is how Switzerland thinks about war and neutrality. The people want to arm). In: *SonntagsBlick* of 17 April 2022

⁶ "Schallenberg bestätigt erneut Österreichs Neutralität" (Schallenberg reaffirms Austria's neutrality). *News ORF* of 21 May 2022

⁷ "Neutralität – Frage eines NATO-Beitritts stellt sich für die Grünen nicht." (Neutrality - Question of joining NATO does not arise for the Greens) In: *Wiener Zeitung Online* of 18 May 2022 (apa).

⁸ "Es braucht auch keine Modifizierung der Neutralität" (There is also no need to modify neutrality). In: *Neue Freie Zeitung* of 14 March 2022

⁹ "Rendi-Wagner bei Scholz: Diplomatie im Ukraine-Krieg alternativlos" (Rendi-Wagner on Scholz: No alternative to diplomacy in the Ukraine war). SPÖ of 18 May 2022 (www.spoe.at/2022/05/18/)

Life under pressure – the difficult everyday life in Syria

by Karin Leukefeld, Damascus/Yabroud



ef. Independent journalist *Karin Leukefeld* has been reporting from the Extended Middle East for daily and weekly journals as well as German state sponsored radio programmes since the year 2000. Since the beginning of the war in 2011 she moves back and forth between Damascus, Beirut, other places in the Arab world and her hometown Bonn. She has published several books, such as "Syrien zwischen Schatten und Licht – Geschichte und Geschichten von 1916-2016. Menschen erzählen von ihrem zerrissenen Land" (Syria Between Light and Shadow – History and Stories 1916–2016. People Narrate about their War-torn Country.) (2016, Rotpunkt edition Zurich); "Flächenbrand Syrien, Irak, die Arabische Welt und der Islamische Staat" (Surface Fire Syria, Iraq, the Arab World and the Islamic State.) (2015, 3rd edition 2017, Papy-Rossa edition, Cologne). Her new book will be released soon: "Im Auge des Orkans: Syrien, der Nahe Osten und die Entstehung einer neuen Weltordnung" (In the Eye of the Hurricane: Syria, the Middle East and the Rise of a New World Order).

In a branch of the state-owned Syrian Commercial Bank in Al-Qassaa, a district of Damascus, there is a dense crowd. Behind the high counters, bank employees sit in front of their computers, typing names and numbers into forms, then sending customers on to the next branch. Some customers wait patiently, others push their way forward with little consideration. Some run from one counter to the next, searching with their forms, until one of the employees takes care of them and escorts them to the right counter.

In the commercial bank fees for electricity or water, taxes or insurance for the car are deposited. But pensions are also collected or special payments are made to families of the fallen or injured.

On this day, the author has to pay the fees for her residence permit, which has to be applied for every year. When the bank employee holds the German passport in her hand, she looks up in disbelief: "What are you doing here," she asks. "Why are you coming from Germany to Syria, when we Syrians all want to go to



Damaskus Souk Adiq. Would you like oranges from the coast?
(picture Karin Leukefeld)

Germany?!" The bystanders laugh and glance over briefly, then turn back to their own business.

A middle-aged woman, her headscarf tied tightly around her, quietly tells us that she is collecting the pension for her father. She comes every two months; the walk had become too tedious for her father. During the war years, the pension had been adjusted several times for inflation. Today, her father receives 8,000 Syrian pounds a month, almost twice as much as before the war. His monthly pension back then was equivalent to about 80 US dollars; today, that money is worth no more than 3 US dollars. Every two months she now collects 16,000 Syrian pounds, the woman says in a lowered voice: "That's just enough for a meal."

Indebted and destroyed

Since the beginning of the war in Syria in 2011, the then very stable economic situation has steadily deteriorated. In 2011, the country was debt-free. The consequences of the war and ongoing sanctions by the EU and the USA are contributing to the disintegration of the economic and social structure in Syrian society. A sign of this is the disappearance of a stabilising middle class; black market trade and corruption are on the rise.

At the end of 2021, around 12 million people, 55 per cent of pre-war Syrian society, were considered poor and depend-

ent on food aid, according to the *World Food Programme WFP*. Resources such as oil, gas or cotton – which are available in Syria – cannot be used by the whole country and have to be bought on the international market.

Many Syrian state institutions, including the central bank, are excluded from the international money market because of Western sanctions. Syria is indebted and has hardly any foreign currency. The national currency, the Syrian lira (SYP), has lost value. In 2011, the exchange rate between the Syrian lira and the US dollar was 1 US dollar = 50 SYP. Today, the unofficial exchange rate is 1 US dollar = 3800 SYP. Officially, the exchange rate is 1 US dollar = 2000 SYP.

Al Souk al Adiq – The Old Market

During the days of the fasting month of Ramadan, the markets only fill up in the afternoon. Then people stream past the many stalls with fruit and vegetables, cheese, fish and sweets to bring home some of the large selection for breaking the fast in the evening. The Old Souk, Al Souk al Adiq, is what the people of Damascus call the popular market on Al Ammara Street, at the northern end of the Old City. In the past, farmers from the surrounding countryside used to come with their fruit and vegetables, chickens, eggs and milk to offer everything fresh.

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When the new wholesale market, the Souk al Hal in Zablalani, was built a few kilometres further south, the farmers brought their goods directly there. Today, the trucks that transport goods to Iraq or as far as Saudi Arabia are also loaded at the new Souk al Hal.

The Old Souk offers everything: strawberries, herbs of all kinds, dates from the United Arab Emirates. There are kiwis from Tunisia, ginger from China, dates and pomegranates from Jordan. "They're not fresh, they come from the fridge," says a vendor apologetically. "It's not the season for pomegranates now." The products from abroad are expensive and customers only buy them in very small quantities, says the date seller, who used to have much more turnover, especially during Ramadan. Dates are part of the ritual of breaking the fast, but many families do without them today for cost reasons.

A separate stall sells cheese and eggs, which are brought from Saidnaya, about 30 km away. In the past, a pallet of 30 eggs cost 250 to 300 Syrian pounds. Today, the price per pallet is 11,000 SYP. At the neighbouring stall there are fruits and vegetables that come from Syria, except for the Egyptian potatoes: Large avocados from the coast, where also the oranges come from. Garlic, potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, onions, aubergines, lettuce – everything is artfully piled up and displayed.

Good tomatoes from the Hauran

Here *Abu Ahmad*, who was just 15 years old when he started working at the vegetable stall in 2003, sells. He is sorting out



Damaskus Souk Adiq. Abu Ahmad was 15 years old when he started working at the vegetable stall. (picture Karin Leukefeld)

the soft and less attractive tomatoes from a large, sprawling basket of tomatoes. He works seven days a week from 9:00 in the morning to 9:00 in the evening, he says on the side. His daily wage is 15,000 SYP, but that is not enough for him, his wife and three children. He also worked here during the war, he continues. In 2009, he had completed his military service and fortunately was not called up again during the war.

At 3,000 SYP per kilo, the tomatoes are very expensive because they are grown under plastic sheets near Baniyas, on the coast. From there they have to be transported to Damascus, and that is expensive:

"Diesel is expensive, but also the fertilizer that has to be bought abroad is expensive," explains Abu Ahmad, Ahmad's father. What is bought abroad has to be paid for in US dollars, which makes everything more expensive. The good tomatoes, grown naturally – not under plastic sheets – are available between May and December and come from Hauran (Deraa). That is not far from Damascus, and so the tomatoes from there are not only better, but also cheaper. But they are not always available. When Abu Ahmad started working at the market 19 years ago, people would buy 5 kilo boxes of tomatoes for 100 SYP, he recalls. Today, they buy a quarter or maybe half a kilo of tomatoes; more is too expensive, he says.

Fresh fish hardly affordable

A few steps away, *Abdul Rahman Afan* stands in front of his fish shop. His fish is good and fresh, he praises the goods. The fish come from fish farms in the Ghab, a fertile plain along the Orontes River in Idlib. Others come from fish farms in Anjar, in neighbouring Lebanon. He also offers fish from the Euphrates, and the shark hanging from the ceiling behind him was caught in the Mediterranean near Latakia. Salmon is imported and costs 50,000 SYP per kilo – for some people that is a month's salary. Before the war, his business was really good, he recalls. Restaurants and hotels were his customers, and ordinary people, families, would buy 3 kilos of fish for 100 to 200 SYP, depending on the type of fish.

Today, a kilo costs at least 18,000 SYP, hardly anyone could still afford it. People buy the fish by the piece or they

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Damaskus Souk Adiq. On the right Bassam Hawary. (picture Karin Leukefeld)

"Life under pressure ..."

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buy the small, cheaper sardines, Afan says: "And when they buy fish, they need oil, which has become very, very expensive. And they need at least potatoes to go with it, the price of which has also gone up," says Abdul Rahman Afan, shrugging his shoulders. Abdul Rahman took over the fish shop from his father, who in turn inherited the business from his father. He will never give up the family business, but he is thinking of selling the shop here in the Old Souk and perhaps opening three or four smaller shops in different locations. But who could find 1 billion Syrian pounds to buy the shop?! Business is bad, but if he sells now, he will lose additional money.

Leather and ropes

One of the countless alleys and narrow streets leads into a quiet, covered passageway that ends at a wall. Here is the market for leather and ropes, here is the shop of *Bassam Hawary*, who, like most of the traders in the Old Market, also comes from a family of traders. His father sold tyres for cars, two-wheelers and carts, Bassam Hawary sells nets made of canvas and nylon. They are used for transport, for decorations or in sports for hand goals and football goals, he explains. Looking at a hammock hanging from the ceiling, he says there is not much demand for such things today. He opened his shop 25 years ago and business was good before the war. Even during the war, he was able to sell well, but now the situation is worse than ever. He had built up the business so that his sons could take it over one day. But they now live in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates: "They can't find decent work here anymore."

Prices have risen enormously, Hawary says. There is no longer as much Syrian cotton as before the war, and transport has become very expensive because of the shortage of petrol and diesel. "Yet we have enough oil to supply the whole country! We have oil, cotton and wheat and everything is in our country." But Syrian resources are no longer there for the whole of Syria. The largest cotton growing areas in the Euphrates Valley are under US occupation and Kurdish control, and only a fraction of them reaches the processing textile factories in Aleppo, and at a high cost. Today, cotton from Al Ghab, the fertile Orontes Valley, which was occupied for years by Islamists – with the support of Turkey – is mainly processed there. Most of the cotton that is processed in Syria today

*Yabrud Umm Issam (picture Karin Leukefeld)*

comes from China – just like the nylon ropes. And it has to be paid for in foreign currency.

Umm Issa, the net weaver

The nets that Bassam Hawary sells in his shop are still knotted by hand in Yabroud, about 80 km north of Damascus. *Umm Issa Barakati* is responsible for production and distributes the orders to five other women. She herself learned the work from her mother, and she was six years old at the time. "And, how old do you think am I today," she smiles. "Today I am 79 years old and only have some problems with my knees." For more than 100 years, she says, the women in her family were known as net weavers. Back then, nets were also knotted for hunting; no machine could do this work like she and the other women, she is convinced.

Umm Issa, Issa's mother, lives with her daughter and her family. The daughter has a shop, she cooks and cleans the flat and helps where she can, she says proudly. The son also has work, she adds. "I thank God that we can live well."

The simple workstation is in the reception room of her flat. Cotton is rolled up on a wooden trestle. In front of her, on a chair, is another trestle, on which is rolled up the finished net she is knotting with a wooden shuttle. She knots about five metres of net a day, says Umm Issa. For this she receives 2,000 SYP and is satisfied. She has just received an order from Saudi Arabia – through Bassam Hawary, whom she calls Abu Muhannad, Muhannad's father: "We are to knot curtains for doors.

1.70 metres wide and 2.25 metres high. We are waiting for the ropes so that we can start work."

(Translation *Current Concerns*)**Current Concerns**

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