

# Current Concerns

The international journal for independent thought, ethical standards, moral responsibility, and for the promotion and respect of public international law, human rights and humanitarian law

English Edition of Zeit-Fragen

## “This ruling is a legal milestone”

### Serbian court confirms the link between depleted uranium (DU) and cancer

An interview with attorney Dr Srđjan Aleksić



Srđjan Aleksić (picture cm)

ef. In its 20 May edition, *Current Concerns* reported on the ruling of the Serbian court in Pančevo<sup>1</sup>. This is the first ruling in Serbia to establish a causal link between exposure to depleted uranium, DU, during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 and the tremendous rise of serious cancer cases among Serbians. This judgement is the result of the untir-

ing efforts of Serbian lawyer Dr Srđjan Aleksić, who has been working for many years to obtain evidence of this causality that can be used in court.

Within 10 months, May 2024 to March 2025 – the duration of the litigation – the court in Pančevo has granted the claim against the Serbian state in behalf of a client suffering from lung cancer. During the 1999 war, he was deployed by the Serbian army as a reservist and served in Pančevo, a city in the autonomous province of Vojvodina, Serbia, where a petrochemical plant and oil industry facilities are located. NATO bombed these facilities with depleted uranium munitions. Doctors subsequently found depleted uranium and heavy metals – substances that are extremely harmful to health in Zoran Karišić’s body. As a result, he developed lung cancer and has more recently been diagnosed with colon cancer. Several thousand people with cancer or their relatives have contacted Aleksić’s law firm hoping that the court will recognise their cancer as a consequence of NATO bombing with DU ammunition and

that they will receive appropriate compensation.

*Current Concerns* has reported repeatedly on Aleksić’s “long journey”<sup>2</sup>. On pages 3 and 4 of this issue, readers will find a roundup of facts about DU and the history of suppressed studies and evidence related to DU.

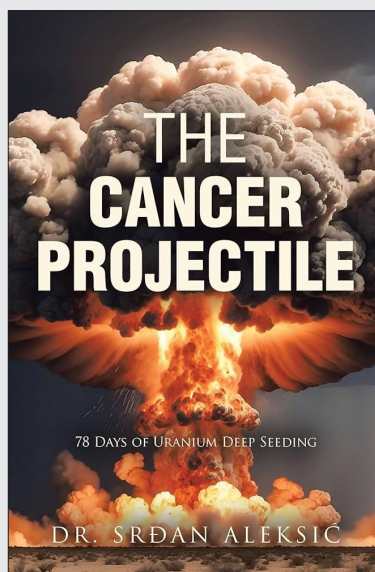
*Current Concerns* spoke with lawyer Srđjan Aleksić about the verdict, which is now available in written and translated form.

*Current Concerns*: Dr Aleksić, first of all, congratulations on this ruling! Could you briefly outline the main points of the ruling for our readers?

Srđjan Aleksić: Thank you sincerely. This ruling is a legal milestone – the first court decision in Serbia that officially establishes a causal link between exposure to depleted uranium during the 1999 NATO bombing and the development of severe cancer in a specific individual.

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“The book once again reminds of the tragic fate of the Serbian people during the NATO aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999. Also, lawyer Dr Srđjan Aleksić talks about his legal fight against NATO and against the use of depleted uranium ammunition. A very important segment is the use of ammunition with depleted uranium, as well as the presentation of the consequences of using ammunition with depleted uranium. Due to the far-reaching and long-lasting consequences caused by NATO’s aggression in 1999, it is necessary that everyone from their domain contributes to the fight for the truth to come to the surface, for the citizens of the Republic of Serbia to receive compensation for all the damage that NATO has caused. In other words, the book indicates that it is necessary for all those who were affected by depleted uranium to receive monetary compensation. Also, it is necessary to clean our country from undegraded depleted uranium. In particular, we should bear in mind the huge amount of depleted uranium that NATO



dumped on the soil of the then FR Yugoslavia. Some analyses indicate that the amount is greater than in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Certainly, the consequences can be remedied in such a way that

those who caused the damage will open hospitals where people will be treated with the most modern methods, using the most modern equipment, where the quality of life of people suffering from cancer will be improved as much as possible. Justice must lead to the fact that all the countries that participated in the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia correct the eco-catastrophe that they caused not only to Serbia but to all of humanity.

A special segment of the book is the practice of Italian courts.

In the end, we can say that the focus of the entire book is man and man’s destiny, looking at it from the point of view of good, but also from the point of view of evil. A person fights and hopes while he is alive, this is exactly the case with all the victims of depleted uranium ammunition, who fight their hardest battles every day, they fight, but they also pray, because it seems that only God has not forgotten about those people.”

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**“This ruling is a legal milestone”**

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My client, Mr Zoran Karišić, was conscripted as a reservist during the war and stationed in Pančevo, near petrochemical and oil facilities that were directly targeted by NATO using DU munitions. Scientific and medical tests later confirmed the presence of depleted uranium and heavy metals in his body, which are known carcinogens. He developed lung cancer, followed by colon cancer – a grim consequence of toxic exposure.

The court recognised that the Serbian state failed in its duty to protect him, during and after his deployment. This decision is not just about compensation. It is an acknowledgment of truth – a long-awaited recognition that the consequences of war extend far beyond the battlefield and into the bodies of those who were left behind.

**Accountability**

*What is so special about this ruling?*

For me, this ruling is more than a professional success: It is the crown of my career. After decades of work in the field of human rights and justice, and after initiating dozens of legal actions, this case stands apart. I have spent the last ten years focused on this issue. It required enormous perseverance, courage, and belief in something that many said could never be proven.

What makes this ruling so special is that it is not just a victory for one man – it is a precedent of national and international importance. It shows that courts, even under pressure, can recognise the truth when it is presented with clear, science-based evidence. But beyond the legal implications, this case affirms something even deeper – that justice, though slow, is still possible, and that the voice of the injured can pierce through the silence of institutions.

Furthermore, this decision addresses the responsibility of the state not only toward its citizens’ health, but also toward environmental protection. It implies that future governments – regardless of political colour – will have to reckon with the legal consequences of environmental neglect and military contamination. It’s a warning to all who believe that toxic legacies can be buried with time. They cannot.

*What does this ruling mean for other countries?*

This ruling has far-reaching consequences beyond Serbia’s borders. After the successful litigations in Italy, [Italian lawyer Angelo Fiore Tartaglia has assisted

the Italian soldiers who were deployed for peacekeeping missions in the Balkans during the 90ies and were affected by the “Balkan syndrome”; he succeeded in 500 litigations up to now.] we are now the second country to obtain a favourable court decision linking depleted uranium to cancer in a soldier. Attempts have been made in other countries, but most ended without justice. This verdict, however, breaks that chain of silence and offers new hope.

To my international colleagues: this is not the end, but the beginning. I hope this ruling gives you the strength and arguments needed to pursue similar cases in your own jurisdictions. The suffering caused by DU weapons is not a local problem – it is a universal human tragedy. And it demands a universal legal response.

This decision has already inspired me to look ahead – to take this issue to international legal fora. Whether through the *European Court of Human Rights*, the *International Criminal Court*, or legislative petitions to the UN and EU, I believe the time has come to push for a complete international ban on depleted uranium weapons. This is not only about justice for the victims of the past – it is about the future. We owe it to our children to leave them a world where such weapons are no longer tolerated.

*What does the ruling mean for you personally?*

This case has been a deeply personal journey. I dreamed of this outcome for years. And as with any dream that becomes a mission, I often faced moments of doubt, fear, and exhaustion. There were times when the obstacles seemed insurmountable – when silence, denial, or political pressure threatened to drown the truth. But I never gave up.

I am first and foremost grateful to God, who gave me the strength to endure. Then to the people around me – my team, the scientists, doctors, colleagues from Italy and beyond, and most of all, the victims and their families, whose pain gave this case its moral clarity. And yes, I am also grateful to myself – for not walking away when it would have been easier to do so.

This ruling is not the end of my mission. It is the beginning of a wider fight – a fight for every person whose life was silently ravaged by toxins, whose suffering was dismissed or ignored. Now, 26 years after the war, we are beginning to see the outlines of justice. This case proves that no entity is untouchable and that no question is too dangerous to ask if one is armed with facts, law, and moral conviction.

*What does this ruling mean for your original goal of holding NATO accountable?*

This ruling takes us one step closer to achieving that goal. While we may not yet be able to directly hold supranational organisations such as NATO legally accountable, we can – and must – hold member states responsible for their participation in actions that have had serious consequences for human health and the environment.

In this historic case, I was not alone. I was joined by my Italian colleague, Attorney Angelo Fiore Tartaglia, whose decades of experience in precisely this type of litigation proved invaluable. In Italy, he has successfully represented victims of depleted uranium exposure and obtained over 400 rulings in favour of Italian soldiers and civilians. Based on that expertise, we established an international legal team in Serbia, headquartered in Niš, which today serves as a regional centre for the pursuit of justice.

Attorney Tartaglia is also officially registered with the *Serbian Bar Association*, allowing us to represent clients jointly in courts throughout the country. Our goal is not only to offer legal support within Serbia, but also to expand this legal battle to other Western Balkan countries that were heavily affected by NATO bombings and subsequent contamination by heavy metals and depleted uranium.

Our vision is to unite victims from Italy, the European Union, and the western Balkans, and to represent them with a unified legal strategy before national and international bodies. This is no longer merely a national issue – it is a global legal and humanitarian struggle for recognition, accountability, and a permanent ban on such weaponry.

Work on this front is already under way – carefully, systematically, and with solid legal grounding. For now, I cannot reveal all the details – but let us leave something for our next conversation. I hope that by then, we will be discussing concrete international steps and broader justice that knows no borders.

What matters most is this: The doors have been opened. The silence has been broken. No one is untouchable. And once truth finds its voice it never goes quiet again. •

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.zeit-fragen.ch/en/archives/2025/nr-11-13-mai-2025/abgereichertes-uran-historisches-urteil-in-serbien>

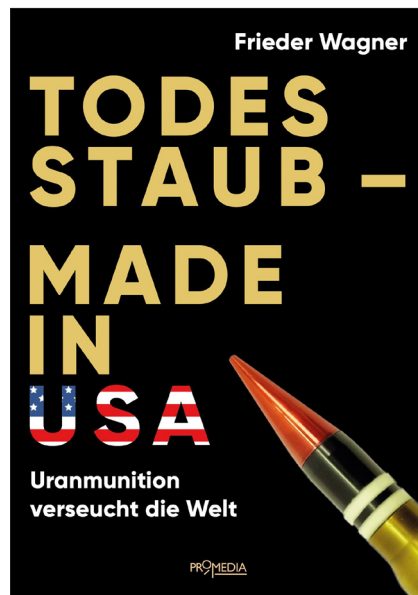
<sup>2</sup> You can find all articles related to this topic published in *Current Concerns* here: [https://www.zeit-fragen.ch/en/search?tx\\_solr%5Bq%5D=Aleksi%20C4%87](https://www.zeit-fragen.ch/en/search?tx_solr%5Bq%5D=Aleksi%20C4%87)

## Pro memoria – Depleted Uranium DU

ev. Although it has been scientifically proven and decades of experience have shown that bunker-busting bombs containing depleted uranium (DU) have numerous harmful and deadly consequences for soldiers, but above all for the civilian population, contaminating the environment and thus the habitat for a long time, it continues to be used and deployed recklessly. Since 2023, such tank shells have been supplied to Ukraine – according to a parliamentary response<sup>1</sup>, the United Kingdom supplied “14 Challenger 2 tanks capable of using depleted uranium shells to Ukraine, along with thousands of rounds of Challenger 2 ammunition including depleted uranium armour-piercing rounds.” It is unclear what the United States supplied. Israel apparently uses uranium weapons repeatedly – in the Gaza Strip, in Lebanon<sup>2</sup>, in Syria, and probably also in Iran. In 1991 and 2003 Iraq, in 1995 Bosnia-Herzegovina, in 1999 Serbia/Kosovo, in 2001 Afghanistan – and today the Middle East and Ukraine.

The heavy metal DU is a waste product of uranium enrichment for use in nuclear power plants and the construction of atomic bombs. Easily available and cheap, it is primarily its weapon-technology characteristics respectively its physical and chemical properties that make it suitable for military and armament use in bunker-busting bombs or armour plating. Although it is not only the USA and Great Britain that have used this material. Due to its harmfulness to humans and the environment other countries have quietly replaced it with other materials (e. g. tungsten), among them Switzerland, too.

However, the discussion in the Western media has been dominated by attempts to deflect, downplay or even suppress the issue, even though the radioactive and chemical toxicity of these weapons has been known for decades. Official bodies, not only in the United States and Great Britain, use a lot of scientific vocabulary to talk around the real problem: It is not the lump of heavy metal, which does actually not emit very strong radiation (although it is toxic in itself), but above all the aerosols produced when these weapons are used. These aerosols are created by combustion at immense temperatures at which everything burns up – blown away by the wind and carried by rain to the ground and water. This is all common knowledge. However, the ‘information’ provided to the public is a textbook example of how to (mostly) avoid lying directly, but instead deliberately misinform by distracting attention with irrelevant facts and omitting the crucial details. Or one is



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preventing relevant studies from becoming known and defaming those who think differently.

The following compilation provides an insight into the known facts, but above all into how cynically people in war zones – civilians and military alike – are treated, but as well the own citizens and soldiers, people everywhere and how it is dealt with the health of many generations.

This also shows how commendable Srđan Aleksić's commitment is, not only for the people of Serbia and Kosovo.

### Respirable and toxic alpha emitters

“Depleted uranium has two excellent properties for military purposes. If it is shaped into a pointed rod and accelerated accordingly, its enormous weight allows it to penetrate steel and reinforced concrete with ease – like hot iron through a piece of butter. This causes abrasion on the uranium rod, which ignites spontaneously due to the enormous frictional heat, with temperatures between 3000 and 5000 degrees Celsius. When such a projectile pierce a tank in a fraction of a second, the depleted uranium catches fire and the soldiers inside the tank are incinerated.”<sup>3</sup>

“At high temperatures of up to 5000 degrees Celsius, the uranium projectile burns to form ceramicised nanoparticles that are 100 times smaller than a red blood cell. This means that a metal gas is created, which further on remains radioactive and highly toxic.”<sup>4</sup>

“The size of the uranium aerosols and the solubility of the uranium compounds in the lungs and gut influence the transport of uranium inside the body. Coarse particles are caught in the upper part of the res-

piratory system (nose, sinuses, and upper part of the lungs) from where they are exhaled or transferred to the throat and then swallowed. Fine particles reach the lower part of the lungs (alveolar region). If the uranium compounds are not easily soluble, the uranium aerosols will tend to remain in the lungs for a longer period of time (up to 16 years), and deliver most of the radiation dose to the lungs. They will gradually dissolve and be transported into the blood stream. For more soluble compounds, uranium is absorbed more quickly from the lungs into the blood stream.”<sup>5</sup>

### ... for they know what they are doing

“Terry Jemison at the US Department of Veterans Affairs stated in August 2004 that over 518,000 Gulf-era veterans (14-year period) are now on medical disability, and that 7,039 were wounded on the battlefield in that same period.”<sup>6</sup>

“DU weapons are very effective kinetic energy penetrators, but even more effective bioweapons since uranium has a strong chemical affinity for phosphate structures concentrated in human DNA.”<sup>7</sup>

“Many renowned scientists, including those from the US military, have repeatedly stated that there is a link between the use of radioactive ammunition and serious illnesses. Here are just a few examples: The findings of Peter Nowell, founder of the Cancer Research Centre at the University of Pennsylvania, from 1976 state: ‘There is no doubt about the ability of radioactivity to cause cancer and also to promote cancer caused by other carcinogens.’ Dr John W. Gofman, former head of the Plutonium Research Group, issued a stark warning, too: ‘By all reasonable standards derived from scientific findings, there is no safe dose of radioactivity. There is no harmless alpha radiation absorbed by the body. If this is a fact, then any tolerated radiation exposure is tantamount to murder.’ Even the US Army’s Radiobiological Research Institute has admitted, based on the work of Dr Alexandra C. Miller and colleagues, that depleted uranium (DU) can cause cancer. They also found that tiny amounts, too small to be toxic and only weakly radioactive, cause more cytogenetic damage in cells than could be explained by their toxicity or radioactivity alone. Their latest results confirm a report by the British Royal Society, which suggests that the toxicity and radioactivity of DU reinforce each other in an unknown way, to such an extent that eight times more cells than predicted suffer cytogenetic damage. As a result, the carcinogenic and genotoxic health risks of DU have been massive-

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## Suppressed studies and evidence

Excerpts from an interview with Frieder Wagner\*

*Hintergrund: Extensive experience with uranium ammunition has been available for more than thirty years. How can it be that the harmful effects on humans and the environment are still considered unproven or controversial? At least that is the tenor of the [German] federal government and the press.*

*Frieder Wagner: These "extensive experiences" and studies were carried out by neutral, critical scientists and were not recognised by the established governments or were presented as «unproven» or "controversial". The WHO studies are a very typical example:*

The fact that so-called independent investigations by the WHO are not independent was made clear in February 2004 at a press conference by retired WHO radiation expert Dr *Keith Baverstock*. In a WHO study in 2001, Baverstock and his co-authors drew attention to the fact that airborne dust containing uranium aerosols, as found in certain places in southern Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in Serbia and Kosovo, is both radioactively harmful and chemically highly toxic. According to Baverstock, the then suppressed WHO study, which was completed in autumn 2001, could have "exerted pressure on the USA and Great Britain and safely curbed the use of uranium weapons". Baverstock said: "The conclusion of our study is that the widespread use of uranium weapons, for example in Iraq, poses a unique threat to the health of the civilian population. We have growing scientific evidence that the radiological activity and chemical toxicity

cause more damage to human cells than we previously thought."

### Hadzici in Bosnia

*Why are the actual findings not being public?*

Studies and investigations into the harmful effects of uranium ammunition are being deliberately prevented by official bodies today. One of the main reasons for this is to avoid expensive claims for compensation and the corresponding reparation processes. I would like to clarify this point:

In 1995, during the Bosnian war, the small Serbian town of Hadzici, 15 kilometres from Sarajevo, was bombed with GBU 28 uranium bombs. The reason was that the Serbs had a tank repair plant there. At that time, the Serbs suspected that the effects of the uranium bombs used in the region could mean life-threatening radioactive radiation for the inhabitants even after their use, and relocated 3,500 citizens from Hadzici to the distant mountain town of Bratunac. But it was too late, as many of these people had already been contaminated. In the following five years, 1112 of the resettled citizens from Hadzici died from aggressive cancers, while hardly any of the citizens from Bratunac fell ill. The British journalist *Robert Fisk* therefore rightly wrote in the British daily newspaper «Independent» that «one could have written on the gravestones of these people: «Died as a result of radioactive uranium ammunition». »

### Genocide of a different kind

*In April 2023, members of the AfD parliamentary group submitted a minor question to the German government on the use of uranium ammunition. In its answer, the German government*

*cites the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the United Nations and writes: "... no significant radiation exposure of the population is to be expected." What do you think of this?*

Such an answer would be stupid, brazen and impertinent. I would like to justify it as follows:

When I visited Iraq, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo to film a WDR television documentary in 2003, our equipment naturally included a Geiger counter to warn us of the deadly dangers of these munitions. We saw that the dangers can be deadly when we visited the hospitals in these countries. Even back then, severely deformed babies were born there. Babies without eyes, legs, or arms, babies with their internal organs encased in a sack of skin. All of these creatures lived for only a few hours, suffering excruciating pain. The cause of these deformities and highly aggressive cancers in adults was not the Chernobyl catastrophe, but the use of uranium munitions and bombs by the USA and its allies in past wars, most of which violated international law. This has now been proven by numerous neutral scientists, including some from the USA. In Iraq, women are now refusing to have children because of this. And if they do, they no longer ask after the birth: Is it a boy or a girl? But rather: Is it healthy or deformed?

\* "Tabuthema Depleted Uranium – ein Gespräch mit Frieder Wagner" (Taboo on the subject of depleted uranium – an interview with Frieder Wagner). In: *Hintergrund* of 9 June 2023; <https://www.hintergrund.de/globales/kriegel/tabuthema-depleted-uranium-ein-gespraech-mit-frieder-wagner/?highlight=Frieder%20Wagner>

### "Pro memoria – Depleted Uranium DU"

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ly underestimated in current government studies."<sup>8</sup>

"The British government and a court of the country recognised as early as 2004 that Gulf War veteran *Kenny Duncan* was entitled to a higher pension because the illnesses he contracted in the 1991 Gulf War were caused by inhaling depleted uranium."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-07-03/192006>

<sup>2</sup> cf. e.g. Robert Fisk, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-mystery-of-israel-s-secret-uranium-bomb-6230359.html>

<sup>3</sup> Frieder Wagner. "Tod bei 5000 Grad"; <http://www.ag-friedensforschung.de/themen/DU-Geschosse/wagner2.html>

<sup>4</sup> "Uranwaffen: Das grösste Kriegsverbrechen unserer Zeit". Interview mit Frieder Wagner; <http://www.ag-friedensforschung.de/themen/DU-Geschosse/wagner.html>

<sup>5</sup> US Nuclear Regulatory Commission; <https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML1723/ML17237C001.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Leuren Moret. "Depleted uranium is WMD". In: *Battle Creek Enquirer* of 9 September 2005

*Leuren Moret* is a geoscientist and former employee at the *Livermore Nuclear Weapons Lab*, where she became a whistleblower in 1991 after observing fraud in the *Yucca Mountain Project*. She currently works as an independent scientist and radiation specialist in communities around the world and has contributed to the *UN Sub-Commission on Depleted Uranium*, among other things.

<sup>7</sup> ibd.

<sup>8</sup> Frieder Wagner. "Tod bei 5000 Grad"; <http://www.ag-friedensforschung.de/themen/DU-Geschosse/wagner2.html>

<sup>9</sup> ibd.

Press release of 3 July 2025

# Forever-Occupation, genocide, and profit

## Report of Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese\* exposes corporate forces behind destruction of Palestine

GENEVA – Israel’s genocide against Palestinians is being sustained by a system of exploitative occupation and profit, the UN Special Rapporteur *Francesca Albanese* warned today in a new report<sup>1</sup> to the Human Rights Council that reveals how corporate profiteering and monetary gain has enabled and legitimised Israel’s illegal presence and actions.

“In the past 21 months, while Israel’s genocide has devastated Palestinian lives and landscapes, the Tel Aviv stock exchange soared by 213 percent (USD), amassing 225.7 billion USD in market gains – including 67.8 billion USD in the past month alone. For some, genocide is profitable,” said Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967.

Albanese’s report exposes the corporate infrastructure profiting from Israel’s economy of occupation – and its deadly transformation into an economy of genocide. The report underscores how Palestine has become the epicentre of a global reckoning, exposing the failure of international business and legal systems to uphold even the most basic rights of one of the world’s most dispossessed peoples.

“Corporate actors are deeply entwined in the system of occupation, apartheid and genocide in the occupied Palestinian territory,” the Special Rapporteur said. “For decades, Israel’s repression of Palestinian people has been scaffolded by corporations, fully aware of and yet indifferent to, decades of human rights violations and international crimes.”

Forty-eight separate corporate actors, along with their parents, subsidiaries, franchisees, licensees and consortium partners across sectors are identified in the Special Rapporteur’s report, including weapons manufacturers, technologi-

\* Francesca Albanese is the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967.



cal corporations, financial institutions and construction and energy firms.

Albanese found that these entities have failed their most basic legal responsibilities to exercise their leverage to bring an end to the violation at stake or terminate relations and disengage. Instead, they have treated Israel’s illegal enterprise in the occupied Palestinian territory as ordinary economic activity – wilfully ignoring documented, systemic abuses, even as atrocities mounted after 7 October 2023.

“These actors have entrenched and expanded Israel’s settler-colonial logic of displacement and replacement – and this is not accidental,” the Special Rapporteur said. “It is the function of an economy built to dominate, dispossess, and erase Palestinians from their land.”

The report named companies supplying F-35s, drones, and targeting tech that enabled 85,000 tons of bombs – six times the amount of Hiroshima – to be unleashed on Gaza. It highlighted tech giants that have set up R&D hubs and data centres in Israel, using Palestinian data for AI warfare, fuelling what Albanese calls a “livestreamed genocide”. The report points to energy giants having fuelled Israel’s blockade, while construction companies continued to supply the equipment

that has turned Gaza to rubble and prevented the return and reconstitution of Palestinian life. Even seemingly neutral actors – tourism sites, supermarkets, and universities are normalising apartheid and the systematic erasure of Palestinian life, the Special Rapporteur’s report found.

“This report shows why Israel’s genocide continues: because it is lucrative for many,” Albanese said. She warned that the *International Court of Justice* 2024 rulings and the ICC arrest warrants should have put all actors – including corporations – on notice.

“The serious, structural and sustained nature of Israel’s crimes and violations triggered a *prima facie* responsibility to disengage – one that many corporations ignored,” she said. “Corporate fixation on narrow technicalities and

isolated violations rather than confronting the structural illegality of their ties to Israel’s occupation is disingenuous,” she said.

Albanese urged member states to impose a full arms embargo, suspend trade and investment agreements, and hold corporate entities accountable for violations of international law.

“Meanwhile, corporations cannot claim neutrality: they are either part of the machinery of displacement – or part of dismantling it.”

“Palestine is a mirror held up to the world’s moral and political failures,” she said. Recalling reckonings over corporate complicity in apartheid South Africa and Nazi Germany, Albanese said Palestine today represents a defining moment of whether global markets can exist without promoting and profiting from injustice and impunity.

“Ending this genocide requires not only outrage but rupture, reckoning, and the courage to dismantle what enables it.” •

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5923-economy-occupation-economy-genocide-report-special-rapporteur>

Source: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/07/forever-occupation-genocide-and-profit-special-rapporteurs-report-exposes> of 3 July 2025

# “A death sentence for people just trying to survive”

Preview of Briefing by Jonathan Whittall, Head of OCHA OPT, to journalists in Deir al Balah, Gaza Strip. Jerusalem, 22 June 2025

While the world’s attention is elsewhere, people in Gaza today are being killed trying to reach food. The attempt to survive is being met with a death sentence.

Since the total blockade was partially lifted – just over a month ago – people have been killed almost daily while trying to get food. I’ve been told over 400 have been killed; and I’ve met some of those injured over the past days in the beds and corridors of the overflowing Nasser hospital.

The majority of the casualties have been shot or shelled trying to reach US-Israeli distribution sites purposefully set up in militarized zones. We see a chilling pattern of Israeli forces opening fire on crowds gathering to get food. Those who are shot are often out of reach of ambulances. We have been told that people are missing, presumed dead, within these militarized zones.

Others have been killed when Israeli forces have fired on Palestinian crowds waiting for food along routes into Gaza. Just a few days ago more than 60 people were killed and hundreds injured when a tank opened fire on a crowd of people waiting for food trucks to arrive.

Some people have also been killed or injured by armed gangs, including those operating in areas close to Israeli forces.

Those trying to protect aid convoys are often themselves targeted by Israeli forces.

It shouldn’t be this way. There shouldn’t be a death-toll associated with accessing the essentials for life.

Last month, the United Nations Relief Chief called on the Security Council to act decisively to prevent genocide in Gaza.

## OCHA

OCHA: *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs* (based in Geneva and New York). OCHA was established by Resolution 46/182 of the UN General Assembly in December 1991. Jonathan Whittall is responsible for the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) at OCHA. He is originally from South Africa and studied tropical medicine in Liverpool. He has been working as a medical doctor in the humanitarian field since 2005, primarily in medical missions for *Médecins Sans Frontières* in disaster and conflict areas.

Today, from Gaza, I can say without a doubt that not enough is being done.

Palestinian life and that which sustains it continues to be systematically dismantled before the world’s eyes.

There is not enough water to drink in Gaza.

Water wells have run out of fuel or are in areas that are dangerous to reach. Broken pipes waste what little water remains. Children are queuing for water trucks that often don’t arrive.

Sanitation is worsening and diseases are spreading. Sewerage is overflowing in the streets.

Our warehouses stand empty while Israel restricts shipments to minimal quantities of mainly medical supplies and food that isn’t allowed to reach warehouses and then households. Displaced families flee with nothing – and we have nothing to give them. All of Gaza is compressed into around 17 per cent of the land.

Partially functioning hospitals are overstretched and under strain. Almost every day there are mass casualties. Hospitals are being directly hit and choked by displacement orders. They are running out of even the most basic supplies.

Fuel is being rationed to prevent a complete shutdown of more life-saving services. Unless the total blockade on fuel entering Gaza is lifted, we will face more senseless and preventable death.

Starvation is increasing.

According to UNICEF, on average, more than 110 children have been admitted for treatment for malnutrition every day since the beginning of 2025.

People are desperate. The little amount of food we are able to bring in is being taken off the back of trucks mostly by hungry crowds and sometimes by criminal gangs.

Israeli authorities are preventing us from distributing through the systems that we have established and that we know work. We have a plan. We could reach every family in Gaza – as we have in the past – but we are prevented from doing so at every turn.

As military operations continue from the air and ground, there remains an abhorrent disregard for humanitarian law. People’s lives and dignity are under attack every day.

What we are seeing is carnage. It is weaponized hunger.

It is forced displacement.

It’s a death sentence for people just trying to survive.

All combined, it appears to be the erasure of Palestinian life from Gaza.

Israel has clear responsibilities as an occupying power. This is not what fulfilling those responsibilities looks like.

We need to see accountability for the crimes committed; we need to see concrete political and economic pressure from states to bring this to an end; and we need to see a lasting ceasefire, in line with the rulings by the *International Court of Justice*.

This is the bare minimum. Inaction enables atrocities that are measured in human lives.

Thank you.

Source: <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/briefing-by-head-of-ocha-opt-to-journalists-in-deir-al-balah-gaza-strip/>

## Current Concerns

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# Once again like a band of robbers – and the “collective West” nods in agreement

by Karl-Jürgen Müller

More than 20 years ago, when a “coalition of the willing” led by the United States had just launched a war of aggression against Iraq in violation of international law, we quoted for the first time the Church Father *Augustine* and his timeless comparison of an imperialist state (“empire”) with a band of robbers. At that time, we had high hopes that serious violations of the law by the state would not leave civilised people indifferent.

Today, we refer to this again, quoting *Augustine* in full:

*Justice being taken away, then, what are kingdoms but great robberies? For what are robberies themselves, but little kingdoms? The band itself is made up of men; it is ruled by the authority of a prince, it is knit together by the pact of the confederacy; the booty is divided by the law agreed on. If, by the admittance of abandoned men, this evil increases to such a degree that it holds places, fixes abodes, takes possession of cities, and subdues peoples, it assumes the more plainly the name of a kingdom, because the reality is now manifestly conferred on it, not by the removal of covetousness, but by the addition of impunity. Indeed, that was an apt and true reply which was given to Alexander the Great by a pirate who had been seized. For when that king had asked the man what he meant by keeping hostile possession of the sea, he answered with bold pride, What you mean by seizing the whole earth; but because I do it with a petty ship, I am called a robber, while you who does it with a great fleet are styled emperor. (De Civitate Dei, 4<sup>th</sup> book; chapter 4)*

Following the bombing of Iran by the US Air Force and US Navy on 22 June in violation of international law, and the ceasefire between Israel and Iran announced by the US President on social media just one day later, this President celebrated himself as a peacemaker and allowed himself to be celebrated. The whole process is reminiscent of a grotesque spectacle, a mixture of absurd madness and cruel tyranny. Was it not the same president who made Israel’s war crimes possible in the first place and provided massive support for them? How can such a US president allow himself to be praised as a peacemaker after having previously promoted war? It is reminiscent of the Wild West.

But that is just an aside.

## “This is unworthy of our humanity”

“[...] It is truly distressing to see the principle of ‘might makes right’ prevailing in so many situations today, all for the sake of legitimising the pursuit of self-interest. It is troubling to see that the force of international law and humanitarian law seems no longer to be binding, replaced by the alleged right to coerce others. This is unworthy of our humanity, shameful for all mankind and for the leaders of nations. After centuries of history, how can anyone believe that acts of war bring about peace and not backfire on those who commit them? How can we think that we are laying the foundations of the future apart from cooperation and a global vision inspired by the common good? How can we continue to betray the de-

sire of the world’s peoples for peace with propaganda about weapons build-up, as if military supremacy will resolve problems instead of fuelling even greater hatred and desire for revenge? People are beginning to realise the amount of money that ends up in the pockets of merchants of death; money that could be used to build new hospitals and schools is instead being used to destroy those that already exist!! [...]”

*From the address of Pope Leo XIV to participants in the plenary session of the “Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches” (ROACO) of 26 June 2025; <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/june/documents/20250626-roaco.html> of 26 June 2025*

The alarm must be sounded again because the renewed US breach of international law (the UN Charter’s prohibition of violence with the sole exception of self-defence) is hardly causing any public outrage in the West anymore. On the contrary, international law is increasingly being ignored if not openly relativised.

I reviewed the extensive national and international press review of the public broadcaster *Deutschlandfunk* from 23 to 25 June and, with one exception, found no mainstream Western voice addressing this blatant breach of law. Newspaper commentaries range from open approval of this war of aggression violating international law, to certain realpolitik concerns. The only exception was the “*Nürnberger Zeitung*” on 24 June, which at least stated that *Trump*’s act of war “creates fear rather than friends beyond Israel because it ignores international law. If world politics remains so reckless, it will soon be worthless, like the paper on which it was so hopefully recorded after the Second World War.”

The statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry on 22 June, excerpts of which are reproduced here, was also appropriate:

*Russia strongly condemns the attacks by the United States on several nuclear facilities in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which were carried out in the early hours of 22 June following the recent attacks by Israel.*

*This reckless decision to launch missile and air strikes on the territo-*



*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke about his plans for a ‘New Middle East’ at the 78<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly on 22 September 2023. The map shows that Netanyahu considers the Gaza Strip and the West Bank to be part of Israel. (picture ma)*

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## Germany on a war footing – but there is also opposition

km. Countries on a war footing usually behave like bands of robbers. The law is ignored, and they are prepared to do anything. And it is usually about the tangible material interests of a few, respectively about maintaining or expanding power. In a sense, the peoples of the states on a war footing are themselves victims of the policies of their (ir)responsible power elites. But talking openly about this is to be avoided at all costs. This is what the dictatorship of opinion serves, what propaganda serves, what “beautiful” propaganda formulas serve. As a rule, it is said that it is a matter of the “defense” of one’s own country, which is necessary for survival. When power elites demand “war readiness,” this is already a particular audacity.

The war policy of the German power elites, one must say in disbelief, is currently progressing “from success to success” – as far as their propaganda is concerned. According to the latest ZDF Politbarometer<sup>1</sup> survey conducted on 27 June, 65 percent of respondents support massive rearmament in the coming years so that Germany can also meet NATO’s five percent of GDP target for military spending. In western Germany, the figure is even as high as 68 percent – significantly more than the 49 percent in eastern Germany. Sixty-three percent of respondents rate Chancellor Merz’s foreign policy as “good.” That is, the German chancellor who thanked Israel – in violation of international law and the

German constitution – for doing the “dirty work” of waging war against Iran and who wants to authoritatively put Germany on a war footing. And Minister Pistorius of the SPD, who wants to make the country “fit for war,” even tops the “popularity scale” of German politicians.

Yes, even the German SPD, which once claimed to stand for peace and justice, for détente and peaceful coexistence, is now mostly on a war footing. At its party conference from 27 to 29 June, a motion from those who supported a manifesto for a new policy of détente<sup>2</sup> published on 11 June was rejected with 65 percent voting against it. The motion called on the party to oppose NATO’s goal, adopted with the votes of the German government, of permanently increasing member states’ defence spending to five percent of gross domestic product. According to the motion’s proponents, this would currently mean spending 225 billion euros annually on armaments – almost half of the federal budget.

The motion stated: “We oppose restricting the federal government’s future ability to act and the Bundestag’s budgetary sovereignty to such an extent through NATO commitments.” They stated there needed to be a social debate before a decision on defence spending is made. It didn’t make sense for this to be based on GDP “rather than on potential threats.” In the debate prior to the vote, an SPD member of the

Bundestag said that the “five percent dictate” was “the opposite of peace policy.” A former SPD member of the Bundestag accused the federal government of agreeing to the five percent because of a “snap of the fingers” from US President Donald Trump and not because the money was really necessary. A former SPD member of the European Parliament called the NATO decision “disturbing, disconcerting, and irritating.” He said it would trigger “a gigantic arms race” because Russia and China would then also rearm.

Sixty-five percent against is a lot. More than 30 percent in favour of the motion is not bad either. So, there is a strong minority – not only in the SPD, but among all German citizens – who, despite all the propaganda, disagree with the German power elites’ course of war. It is definitely possible to build on this.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.zdfheute.de/politik/deutschland/politbarometer-nato-ziel-100.html>

<sup>2</sup> «Friedenssicherung in Europa durch Verteidigungsfähigkeit, Rüstungskontrolle und Verständigung. (Peacekeeping in Europe through defense capability, arms control, and understanding). Manifest der SPD-Friedenskreise»; (Manifesto of the SPD Peace Circles); [https://augengeradeaus.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250611\\_Manifest\\_SPD-Friedenskreise\\_Friedenssicherung\\_in\\_Europa.pdf](https://augengeradeaus.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250611_Manifest_SPD-Friedenskreise_Friedenssicherung_in_Europa.pdf)

### “Once again like a band of robbers ...”

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*ry of a sovereign state, regardless of the justifications put forward, constitutes a flagrant violation of international law, the Charter of the United Nations and the relevant resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, which has consistently and unequivocally condemned such actions as unacceptable. Particularly worrying is the fact that the attacks were carried out by a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.*<sup>1</sup>

And from which country does the following comment originate?

*Some politicians in Europe and the United States supporting the attack on Iran have succumbed to the illusion that this war will be the last war in the Middle East. This illusion has become so deeply ingrained in the minds of some politicians that they are regarding the attack on Iran and the violation of international rules as “dirty work”. They even show gratitude because the burden of this dirty work is being taken off their shoulders. Such*

*thinking spells the end of morality and humanity.*

This was reported in the Tehran newspaper “Shargh” on 23 June. Incidentally, this is not a newspaper close to the government, but one of the political opposition in the country.

There are good reasons to doubt that the Middle East has moved closer to peace as a result of what Donald Trump has called the “12-day war”. Israel and its allies continue to push for regime change in Iran and what they call the “New Middle East”<sup>2</sup>. There are too many indications that this is only a brief respite – and not even that for Israel’s immediate neighbours. Relations have been poisoned too deeply. Western interests in the total colonisation of this region of the world are too tangible.

Our mainstream media continue to fan the flames. On 25 June, the foreign policy editor of the “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” wrote in a commentary: “It is rather unlikely that in such a large country [as Iran], the regime controlling the essential institutions could be overthrown by air strikes alone. But a prolonged war would put the clerical-military ruling system under severe pressure, especially if it were conducted with American participation.” Similarly, the editor-in-chief of the belli-

cose “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” on 27 June (<https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/trumps-angriff-auf-iran-ist-eine-chance-fuer-den-nahen-osten-ld.1890743>); also “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” of 28 June 2025).

The question remains whether we citizens are willing to accept the continuing unabated warmongering of our governments, their henchmen and the interest groups behind them with their propaganda of enemy stereotypes and their arms obsession – as is now the case again with NATO’s decision to massively increase military spending.

So that we and our children will almost certainly be led to the slaughter again in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Or if we ourselves will actively campaign for more peace in the world and support those who are already committed to peace – for an unbiased, realistic analysis of the world situation, against enemy stereotypes and warmongering, for diplomacy and international understanding. •

<sup>1</sup> [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/2029109/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/2029109/) of 22 June 2025

<sup>2</sup> Highly recommended on this topic is the book by former Swiss diplomat Kurt O. Wyss, published posthumously in 2022, *Die gewaltsame amerikanisch-israelische “Neuordnung” des Vorderen Orients* (The Violent American-Israeli ‘Reorganisation’ of the Middle East), Léry Verlag, ISBN 978-3-033-09019-4.

# Russia is going its own way now

## A review of the economic forum in Saint Petersburg

by Stefano di Lorenzo

The 28<sup>th</sup> Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum took place in the “northern capital of Russia” from 18 June to 21 June. The big official theme of the meeting was “Shared Values: The Foundation of Growth in a Multipolar World”. The multipolar world is, of course, one of the eternal themes that has been discussed in Russia in recent years. There is no desire to be a second-rate country: In Russia, the path to building a multipolar world is understood as liberation from Western domination and the consolidation of national sovereignty, which has become a top priority.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said in an announcement before the event that “the focus of the forum programme is on technology and digital transformation”. According to Putin, the idea that the Russian economy is based on raw materials is now outdated. “The contribution of raw materials to the economic dynamics of our country is no longer decisive. Thanks to the work of tens of thousands of companies and businesses, our economy is not only constantly developing, but is also becoming more qualitative, more complex and more diverse,” explained the Russian president in his speech on the third day of the forum.

### The world visits Russia

The collective enthusiasm for one of the most important events of the year was in danger of being overshadowed by the recent tragic events that affected one of Russia’s partners. But while the economic forum in St. Petersburg took place against a backdrop of heavy storm clouds on the international stage – Israel had launched its war against Iran just a week earlier – it was clear that the forum in St. Petersburg was in no way prepared to let this spoil the mood. It was all about the economy and business: to do good business, you need motivation, lots of energy and a good mood.

According to official figures, around 20,000 people from around 140 countries attended the economic forum in 2025. European and American newspapers speak of an isolated and introverted Russia. But what we saw in the aisles of the huge trade fair at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum and the visitor numbers seem to suggest otherwise: The world is no longer just about the West.

Among the foreign guests were representatives of the governments of Indonesia, China, South Africa and Bahrain as well as numerous representatives of inter-



Plenary session of this year’s International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg. (picture Vyacheslav Victorov, Host Photo Agency SPIEF-2025)

national companies – with the exception of Western companies, of course.

The few (Western) Europeans attending the economic forum in St. Petersburg are usually here privately and mostly belong to two categories: those who have been building up good businesses and companies in Russia for years, or those who, for one reason or another, have almost completely lost confidence in the institutions and governments of their countries.

### The mood in business

One of the Europeans who has lived in Russia for a long time and is more concerned with business is *Stefan Dürr*, also a German, founder and president of *EkoNiva*, one of the largest milk and cheese producers on the Russian market, which has now been operating in Russia for thirty years.

“Above all, this event is an opportunity to make new contacts. As far as the economy is concerned, I would say that the economic climate is good. The question today is mainly about the interest rate. Is that really necessary? That’s the problem now. As far as external sanctions are concerned, they are not really a problem”, says Stefan Dürr.

Many Russian businesspeople also confirm that the main value of the business forum lies in the opportunity to establish contacts with other companies and potential partners. “Members of the government, non-governmental organisations and the business community meet here and form a kind of symbiosis. You can meet governors, ministers and own-

ers of large companies in a relaxed atmosphere and discuss many topics here”, says *Andrey Lugovoi*, a member of the Russian parliament, who was also spotted in the corridors of the forum.

Businesswomen are also represented in large numbers. “I think the entrepreneurial climate in Russia is good. Despite the sanctions, small and medium-sized enterprises are being given tools for growth through state support, new markets and technologies. This business forum is one of the platforms that provide such opportunities,” says *Maria*, an entrepreneur from St. Petersburg who is involved in franchising. “What impact have the Western sanctions had? I would say rather positive. After the switch to import substitution, small and medium-sized enterprises in Russia began to grow and expand, while large technology and industrial companies developed faster”, Maria continues.

In the midst of this incessant flurry of business and negotiations, the few European journalists who are here seem to move like foreign bodies in the halls of the Forum, wavering between an affected boredom and a mocking attitude that wants to see in this forum nothing more than another show of Russian propaganda. At any fair there is certainly always a bit of spectacle for bemused and curious visitors, but to dismiss the Forum as simply a staging of the Kremlin propaganda machine to hypnotise naive foreign spectators is to fail to understand the significance of such an event as a reflection of Russian economic power. Thousands of

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# Open Letter on the Manifesto “Securing Peace in Europe through Defense Capability, Arms Control, and Understanding”

cc. On 11 June 2025, various peace circles within the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) published a manifesto\* calling for a different German foreign and defense policy: improved defense capability, but no arms race; a realistic threat assessment; more graduatecy; and a new policy of détente toward Russia instead of escalating the confrontation. The manifesto was also signed by prominent Social Democrats who previously held high party and government offices. One of them is Rolf Mützenich, the leader of the SPD parliamentary group in the last German Bundestag. The following open letter is addressed to him.

Cologne, 19 June 2025

Dear Dr Mützenich

We welcome your publication of a statement in this day and age in which - in light of the war in Ukraine and the fundamental human rights violations in Gaza - you come out in favour of a path of graduatecy and against pursuing a “military confrontation strategy”.

We support your demand that no new American medium-range missiles be stationed in Germany, which would make us a primary target in the event of a conflict. The billions of euros demanded for the irresponsible arms buildup due to an alleged looming war must be invested in the underfunded social security systems.

We share your view that a differentiated analysis of the causes is necessary and are opposed to assigning guilt one-sidedly. You cite international agreements that were already concluded in previous years to promote cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution between (European) nations. We, too, consider a return to

the binding *CSCE Final Act of Helsinki* (1975), the *Charter of Paris* (1990), and the *OSCE Charter for European Security of Istanbul* (1999) to be essential to achieving and maintaining peace in Europe.

We support the continuation of a tradition that pursues the peaceful settlement of conflicts on equal terms and, like you, we recognise the necessity of adhering to the goal of common and undivided security in Europe. In this spirit, we recall the peace mandate in the preamble to the German *Basic Law*<sup>1</sup> and would like to endorse *Kofi Annan*, who said: “We don’t need any more promises. We must start keeping the promises we have already made.”<sup>2</sup>

As citizens, we hope that you will succeed in convincing the SPD/CDU ( Social Democrats/ Christian Democrats) coalition partners of the fundamental importance of your important declaration.

Sincerely,

**Wilhelm Barth**, qualified social scientist; Dr. h. c. **Hans von Sponeck**, UN deputy secretary-general, retd.; **Rita Müller-Hill**, teacher, retd., Köln; Dr.-Ing. **Christian Fischer**, publicly appointed and sworn expert; **Marion Fischer**, secondary school teacher, retd.; Dr med. **Susanne Hörnemann**, medical psychotherapist, Cologne; Dr. med. **Susanne Ley**, internist and rheumatologist, Cologne; **Wolfgang Ley**, qualified social worker, Cologne; **Marion Trommenschläger**, qualified pedagogue, retd., Cologne; **Hannelore Kastenholz**, teacher; **Uwe Trieschmann**, MD; **Eva Aras**, teacher, retd.; **Hauke Dressel**, software-developer, Frechen; **Michael Kellner**, teacher, retd., Cologne; **Heike Hupe**, secondary school teacher, retd.; Dr **Lars-Oliver Höinck**, qualified chemist, Cologne; **Angelika Spur**, MD and **Wieland Spur**, MD, Rielasingen-Worblingen; **Marilies Kupsch**, special education teacher, retd., Wartberg; **Peter Reitz**, qualified economist, consultant, Cologne; **Reinhild Felten**, depu-

ty school principal, retd.; **Helga Cieslik**, primary school teacher, retd.; **Katja Martens**, teacher, Rheinbach; **Annelene Neuhaus**, secondary school teacher, retd., Cologne; **Sabine Schmidt**; **Christine Green-Ottens**, qualified social pedagogue, Alfter; **Christian Ottens** MBA, Alfter; **Susanne** and **Matthias Klaus**, teachers; **Martina Nixdorf**, qualified social scientist and German Sociological Society supervisor; **Peter Rohleder**, Cologne; **Norbert Kissler**; **Elke Rauh-Reinschmidt**, teacher for special education, retd.; **Uwe Reinschmidt**; **Anna Giltz**, qualified librarian, Cologne; **Maria Froitzheim**, teacher; **Julia Lang**, special needs pedagogue, retd., Neunkirchen Seelscheid; **Jürgen Lang**, teacher, retd., Neunkirchen-Seelscheid; **Maria Luise Lang**, retiree, Neunkirchen-Seelscheid; **Ute Fux**, retiree, Cologne; **Arie Prusznowski**, agent, retd., Berlin; **Gerti Prusznowski**, teacher, retd., Berlin; **Dietmar Kirch** MD, specialist in neurology, psychiatry and psychotherapy; **Ursula Kirch**, paediatric nurse; **Gerda Reuter**, graduate translator and qualified social worker, Bonn; **Petra Birgitt Hobbach**; **W. D. Trenkmann**, social worker, retd.; **Karin Swagers-Breuer**, physiotherapist, retd., Cologne; **Johanna Josifek**, teacher, retd., Cologne; **Karin König**; **Heidrun Vogel**, special needs teacher, retd.; **Traudel Anders**, director of studies, retd.; **Petra Maaz**, elementary teacher, retd., Rösrath; **Michael Maaz**, Rösrath; **Regina Peters**, Qualified in Social Sciences, Cologne

\* “Friedenssicherung in Europa durch Verteidigungsfähigkeit, Rüstungskontrolle und Verständigung. Manifest der SPD-Friedenskreise (Securing Peace in Europe through Defense Capability, Arms Control, and Understanding. Manifesto of the SPD Peace Circles)”; [https://augengeradeaus.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250611\\_Manifest\\_SPD-Friedenskreise\\_Friedenssicherung\\_in\\_Europa.pdf](https://augengeradeaus.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20250611_Manifest_SPD-Friedenskreise_Friedenssicherung_in_Europa.pdf)

<sup>1</sup> “Conscious of their responsibility before God and man, inspired by the determination to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe, the German people, in the exercise of their constituent power, have adopted this Basic Law.”

<sup>2</sup> “We don’t need any more promises. We must begin to keep the promises we have already made.” Quoted from: Abiola Hafsat, Rudolf Adam, Franz Alt, Max Arlt, Maude Barlow: *Impulses for a World in Balance, Global Marshall Plan Initiative*, Hamburg 2005. ISBN 3-9809-7232-1, page 485

## “Russia is going its own ...”

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people are working here with enthusiasm and commitment to build something big. And even if the performance of the Russian economy may be modest according to some indicators, it is clear that the Russian economy is the largest in Europe when adjusted for purchasing power.

### New horizons

What becomes clear in St Petersburg is that Russia’s “turn to the East” – or, to use another metaphor, the turn to the Global South – appears to be a completed and now irreversible process. It cannot be said that today there is the impression

that Russia misses the West unbearably. The import substitution of Western goods – largely through Chinese analogues, which, prejudices aside, are in no way inferior to Western products in terms of quality and are technologically superior in many respects, but also through Russian production – has not only shown that Russia can manage quite well without the West, it has also given the economy a strong boost. One thing seems certain: the time of the “Western-orientated” Russia is over: new horizons are opening up before it and Russia has understood that it can manage without the West without really losing much in the process.

“The current crisis will leave its mark for a generation”, says *Stanislav Tkachenko*, Professor of International Relations at St. Petersburg State University. “Russian politicians no longer regard Europe as a reliable partner.”

Russia is clearly no longer interested in running after the West and imitating it in everything. The country now wants to go its own way and create its own destiny. It definitely no longer lacks self-confidence. •

# An encounter with the French-Russian author Andreï Makine

by Carola and Johannes Irsiegler, Rita Müller-Hill

*Andreï Makine, a well-known and respected writer in France, recently presented his new book “Prisonnier du rêve écarlate” (Prisoner of the Scarlet Dream) in Paris.*

Makine grew up in the former USSR, where he studied philology and wrote his doctoral thesis on contemporary French literature. After teaching briefly in Novgorod, he has been living in France since 1987, where his writing career began. In 1995, he was awarded the prestigious *Prix Goncourt*, which honours the best French-language novels of the year, for his novel “Le testament français”. He has been a member of the *Académie française* since 2016.

## The communist Lucien Baert – in the gulag of the ‘workers’ paradise’

In his novel “Prisonnier du rêve écarlate”, the author traces the path of a young French workingman, *Lucien Baert*. Lucien is an idealist and has joined the Communist Party. In 1939, he travels to the USSR with a group of young communists wishing to get to know the workers’ paradise for himself. When war breaks out in 1939, he is imprisoned as a “foreign spy” and spends several years in Stalin’s gulag.

After Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, he is offered release if he fights in the Red Army against the German invaders. He survives various life-threatening situations thanks to the spontaneous help of fellow human beings, be they fellow prisoners or fellow soldiers. Finally, he can adopt the identity of a killed Russian comrade, which subsequently brings him relief and thus saves his life.

As the Red Army advances, he is captured by the Germans, but is quickly freed. However, his martyrdom continues, given that all Russian soldiers captured by the Germans are sent back to the gulag as supposed traitors. As a result of torture and torment there, he almost loses his mind. After many years he is released in 1957.

## Back in France

He is assigned a small town in the far north of Russia as his place of residence. There he meets a woman, *Daria*, who is also stranded in this wasteland. After having saved her life, he falls in love with her. His own memories, which had been almost erased by the torture, are brought back due to Daria’s human compassion. As a result, his desire to return to his family in France grows. In 1967, he succeeds in taking this step. After almost thirty years, the former

communist returns to a country that is in turmoil and whose cultural foundations have been shaken. Lucien is received into a milieu of journalists who want to market him for their political agenda as an “anti-Stalinist”. What he actually had experienced is of no real interest.

Makine aptly describes the milieu of Parisian intellectuals, a milieu which is defined by drugs, superficiality, opportunism and intolerance. He paints the moral picture of a generation that has influenced the further development of France and Europe and that, by a destructive cynicism, has contributed to the misguided developments and the nihilism of our societies today. Lucien increasingly takes a critical look at these processes and rebels against them. In response, he is forcibly psychiatrised and subjected to uncontrolled medical experiments, as he has neither family nor friends who stand up for him.

## Back in the Soviet Union

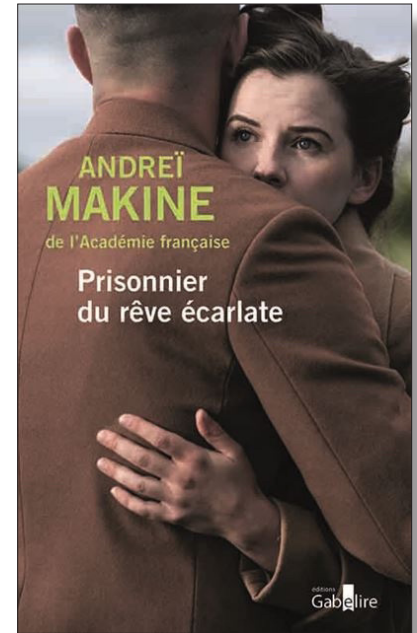
He gets unexpected support from an older, free-thinking man politically close to the Royalists. The older royalist and the younger communist become friends. Lucien decides to return to the USSR, and he manages it with the help of his older friend. He searches for Daria and finds her. Their love for each other still exists. Together with the other inhabitants of the abandoned region in the taiga, they finally succeed in building up a network of mutual help in which their lives find valuable meaning. The following passage clearly expresses the humanist intention of the protagonists and thus of Makine:

“Sometimes Lucien talks about the ideas of his youth: a revolution to end the servitude of workers. Threatened by the loss of their jobs, proletarians look at their labour as a privilege which the capitalist endows him with. Communism was to replace this slavery with free cooperation, in a society without classes, without financial diktats ...

Daria says in an embarrassed tone: ‘At university, we studied these fine theories and I even got good marks in my exams. But ... those who tortured you in prison had read *Lenin*. And with what result?’

Regretting this debate, she quickly concludes: ‘The most important thing is to bear in mind those who are here among us. Yes, all those old people ... You said ‘free cooperation’? No, just someone you shouldn’t let down ...’

As Lucien travels through these ‘rural hamlets with no prospects’, he notices that the people living there are getting



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closer to a way of life where material interests give way to mutual aid and a desire to help the weakest. It is here that he encounters careless generosity, the freedom to work without fear of being replaced by someone more capable.”<sup>1</sup>

## Taking the path of humanity

The novel ends in the years of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the *Yeltsin* years, in which statehood decays and nihilism and mafioso-like structures spread.

Makine’s novel takes us on a journey through a violent century. However, he shows that even in these times there is always a commitment to help, humanism, friendship, love and brotherhood – across all political opinions. He thus opposes the nihilistic cynicism that is prevalent today with a credo of humanity.

With “Prisonnier du rêve écarlate”, Makine builds on his previous novels, in which he over and over again deals with the fates of people who are trying to find their way amidst the confusion of their time and, in doing so, pursue the path of humanity. He provides these people with a voice and fights against the injustice done to them and their fellow human beings being forgotten.

His way of facing the fate of his protagonists in recent history and, above all, his humanist concerns remind of the work of the Kyrgyz-Russian writer *Chinghiz Aitmatov*, whose novels have contributed to understanding the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> cen-

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# The Council of States rejects the Neutrality Initiative, but wants to include Neutrality more clearly in the Federal Constitution

by René Roca\*

Two committees of the Council of States at once dealt with the *Neutrality Initiative* (NI). The *Security Policy Committee* (SPC-S) did not discuss it in depth, followed the Federal Council's message and rejected the initiative without any counter-proposal.

The *Foreign Affairs Committee* (FAC-S) took the matter more seriously. It postponed the vote on the NI a total of three times, apparently discussed the proposal intensively, obtained expert opinions and studied numerous sources on Swiss neutrality. Such a way of dealing with a concern from the population (and not, as sometimes mistakenly maintained, from the centre of a political party), is an excellent example of the pre-effect of direct democracy. An initiative triggers debate and fundamental reflection can take place. In the *APK-S*, this also included discussing a direct counter-proposal alongside the initiative. In the end, both were rejected, but there is now a good basis for an objective debate in the Council of States.

The Council of States discussed the NI for three hours. The votes of the members of the Council of States varied in terms of quality and content. However, the issue was discussed seriously, as same as the direct counter-proposal, which the FAC-S first proposed and then rejected. The NI was ultimately rejected, but the direct counter-proposal was accepted. The Federal Constitution shall be amended as follows:

## “Art. 54a Swiss neutrality

*1 Switzerland is neutral. Its neutrality is perpetual and armed.*

*2 The Confederation shall use the neutrality to guarantee Switzerland's independence and security, to prevent conflicts or to contribute to the resolution of conflicts. It is available as a mediator.”*

The first section is of the same content as in the NI. The following two sections of the NI were deleted. The fourth section of the NI is also adopted and even supplemented. The fourth section of the NI states: “Switzerland shall utilise its perpetual neutrality to prevent and resolve conflicts and shall be available as a mediator.” The addition to the counter-proposal emphasising the protective effect of neutrality for Switzerland's independence and security is an important addition. However, this addition never compensates the loss of meaning of the two deleted sections!

The omitted sections two and three contain essential demands to define Swiss neutrality in a clearer wording. Section two states that Switzerland should not join any military or defence alliance. Section three formulates the principle that Switzerland may not take part in any military conflict in between third countries, nor may it take any non-military coercive measures against belligerent nations. These aspects are fundamental to integral and comprehensive neutrality, which must be enshrined in the Federal Constitution. Only, if Switzerland stops to converge closer to NATO and if it no longer supports any economic sanctions, it will once again be regarded as a neutral country.



It is now up to the National Council to decide on the initiative and the counter-proposal during the upcoming autumn session from 8th to 26th of September. If the National Council also votes in favour of the direct counter-proposal, both will be put to the vote. However, this will only happen if the NI committee, which consists of 27 people, does not withdraw the initiative. It must be clear that Swiss neutrality can only be credibly anchored in the Federal Constitution with the four sections of the NI.

This will once again enable Switzerland to fully commit itself to peace in the world and to act as a mediator. It is also the best and most sustainable way to support Switzerland's good offices and the ICRC.

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## “An encounter with ...”

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tury and, in particular, the history of the Soviet Union.

Yet, the Western world has to face its own history in an honest and, above all, ideology-free way. Andreï Makine contributes to this from the perspective of someone who experienced both ruling systems of the 20th century, Soviet communism and Western-style capitalism.

In France, his new novel has been ignored by the mainstream. Moreover, his last works have not been translated into German. His humanistic attitude, which is evident in his consistent commitment

to understanding and reconciliation between peoples and his advocacy of freedom of thought in the best Voltairean sense, doesn't seem to fit in with the prevailing Zeitgeist.

We wish him and ourselves that his books will once again be translated into all the world's languages and moreover find a broad reading public.

<sup>1</sup> “Parfois, Lucien reparle des idées de sa jeunesse: une révolution mettant fin à la servitude des travailleurs. Menacé par la perte d'emploi, le prolétaire considère son labeur comme un privilège dont le capitaliste le gratifie. Le communisme devait remplacer cet esclavage par une coopération libre, dans une société sans classes,

sans diktat financier ...

Daria confie sur un ton embarrassé: ‘A l'université, nous avons étudié ces belles théories et j'ai même eu de bonnes notes aux examens. Mais ... ceux qui t'ont torturé en prison avaient lu Lénine. Et avec quel résultat?’ Regrettant ce débat, elle se hâte de conclure: ‘L'essentiel, c'est de penser à ceux qui sont là, parmi nous. Oui, tous ces vieux ... Tu disais ‘une coopération libre’? Non, juste quelqu'un qu'on ne doit pas abandonner ...’

En parcourant ces ‘localités rurales sans perspectives’ Lucien constate que ceux qui y vivent se rapprochent d'un mode d'existence où l'intérêt matériel cède place à l'entraide, à la volonté de secourir le plus faible. C'est ici qu'il rencontre une générosité irréflectie, la liberté de travailler sans craindre d'être remplacé par quelqu'un de plus performant.” (p. 367)

# Neutrality is the cornerstone of our state

## From the debate on the neutrality initiative within the Council of States, on 19 June 2025

by Dr iur. Marianne Wüthrich

*It is remarkable what a lively discussion the neutrality initiative has sparked in the Council of States. Around half of the council members present spoke, which in itself shows the special significance that neutrality has for us Swiss. It is good that the neutrality initiative is stimulating discussion and reflection on this core Swiss issue in parliament and among the population.*

Not a single speaker questions neutrality itself. Some outstanding statements are also encouraging. Unfortunately, however, the lack of serious history teaching in our schools and the departure from a neutral foreign policy over decades have also left their mark. One speaker claimed, for example, that every member of the Council of States had a different concept of neutrality, and that these 46 ideas were also reflected in the population. Another picked up on the absurd idea that the initiative was contrary to the UN Charter.<sup>1</sup> The initiative counters such wild speculation: neutrality, and thus Switzerland's understanding of itself as a state, is based on a historically grown foundation of values that must not be left to arbitrariness.

### Counterproposal does not answer the key questions

In the vote, a majority in the Council of States agreed with the initiators in that they want to enshrine neutrality as a principle in the constitution. However, this is only in the form of a significantly watered-down counterproposal – but at least it is something. The author of the proposal, *Benedikt Würth* (of party Die Mitte SG), states: “Switzerland's neutrality is not only a valuable asset for us, but also an important element for the international community, especially at a time when we are seeing the formation of blocs.” That is why the minority of the Foreign Affairs Committee is “convinced that this central principle of statehood has constitutional status.” The catch with the counterproposal is that its authors want to give the Federal Council as much freedom as possible in its foreign policy: “We do not recommend rejecting it [the initiative] because we reject neutrality, but because we reject the initiative's attempt to handcuff the Federal Council. These are paragraphs 2 and 3 of the initiative.” (*Pirmin Bischof*, Die Mitte SO). The “handcuffs” refer to the ban on participation in military alliances and non-military sanctions against war-

ring states, according to the text of the initiative.

Then there are the tacticians who, basically, don't have much to do with neutrality, but who calculate that a counterproposal will improve the chances of the initiative being rejected in the referendum. One such tactician is *Thierry Burkart* (party FDP AG), who describes himself as a transatlanticist and even fears that the counterproposal will make it more difficult to achieve his goal of integrating our country into NATO, but nevertheless agrees to it, *willy-nilly*: “From a political point of view, I naturally see the advantage that a counter-proposal to the popular initiative would avoid the enshrinement of neutrality in the constitution being contrasted with the option of doing nothing, so to speak. In contrast, the counter-proposal would contrast one variant of neutrality with another variant of neutrality [...]”.

*Jakob Stark* (party SVP TG) brings the discussion back to the Swiss understanding of neutrality: “On 28 February 2022, the *Bloomberg* news agency ran a headline saying that the Swiss had abandoned their historic neutrality in order to implement sanctions against Russia; and the ‘New York Times’, for example, stated that Switzerland was thus setting aside its long tradition of neutrality.” By adopting these sanctions, “Switzerland has completely relinquished its authority to interpret and define neutrality,” according to Stark. He states: “We have no choice but to agree on a definition of the Federal Constitution that is applicable today. Otherwise, our neutrality and foreign policy will remain ineffective.” However, the counterproposal does not answer the central questions: “It is actually heading in the right direction, and I will eventually support it, but the counterproposal also sidesteps the essential questions that concern us, namely the question of participation in a military alliance and the question of sanctions. These are actually the two questions we need to answer.”

### ‘Switzerland is neutral.

#### Its neutrality is perpetual and armed’

It is balm for the heart and mind that a number of members of the Council of States not only want to enshrine perpetual armed neutrality in the constitution, but also point out that it must be lived.

In this sense, *Heidi Z'graggen* (Die Mitte UR) states: “Switzerland's neutrality is perpetual and armed. One is in-

conceivable without the other. Perpetual means not only the period since 1848 and beyond, perpetual means that neutrality applies not only in times of war, but also in times of peace. This is known as the ‘pre-effect’. The preliminary effect requires restraint in foreign policy, such as refraining from joining military alliances or exporting weapons to conflict regions, as has been the practice since the 1970s with the *War Material Act*. In a changing world – and, incidentally, it is a constant in the world that everything changes – Switzerland must maintain a balance between sovereign independence and the ability to act in foreign policy, between adherence to principles and pragmatic realism. No one is saying that it is easy to find the right balance here. But I believe that in recent years, the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of alliance, almost to the point of de facto NATO membership. The pre-emptive effect of perpetual neutrality has been diluted. Simply continuing as before therefore jeopardises Switzerland's credibility.”

*Beat Rieder* (Die Mitte VS) believes it is necessary to enshrine neutrality as a principle in the constitution in order to commit the Federal Council and Parliament to perpetual neutrality: “There is a real danger and possibility that the Federal Council and Parliament could lose their balance here and abandon the principle of neutrality in favour of one party in the event of war. This would irrevocably destroy the principle of neutrality.” On the other hand, enshrining the principle of neutrality in the constitution would restrict the parliament and the Federal Council in their foreign policy actions, according to Rieder, which would not suit everyone: “I cannot help feeling that certain circles are so strongly opposed to the principle of neutrality in the Federal Constitution because they want to reserve for themselves the leeway to abandon neutrality in specific situations. [...] That is precisely not neutrality. Because neutrality is permanent, in all conflicts, and it is armed. That means it needs its own army.”

### Neutrality is a pillar of our identity

The same Council members recall the historical development of Swiss neutrality. In 1848, it was not necessary to enshrine neutrality as a specific article in the Federal Constitution, according to Beat Rieder: “At that time, there was no need for a corresponding constitutional provision

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### “Neutrality is the cornerstone ...”

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among the population and in Parliament. People knew what had to be done. [...] At that time, however, there was no question of Switzerland forming closer ties with other confederations in order to secure its independence. War was omnipresent in Europe, and so neutrality was very much understood as a means of securing Switzerland’s independence and peace. It was understood to mean that Switzerland would not allow itself to be drawn into armed conflicts with other states, regardless of which conflict was raging in Europe at the time.”

And Heidi Z’graggen: “Neutrality is the cornerstone of the Swiss state, and has been for generations, since the Tagsatzung of 1674 and then especially since the founding of the federal state in 1848. It is a fundamental element of the Swiss identity, enshrined in the constitution. However, its form has remained changeable. [...] Neutrality has proven its worth. It has ensured freedom of action, the preservation of independence and peace on our own soil. With a clear compass: Switzerland does not allow itself to be drawn into armed conflicts, does not participate in wars and opposes war as a means of conflict resolution.

Neutrality has shaped our state for generations and guided it safely through the storms of Europe’s turbulent, eventful and difficult history. It is more than a foreign policy instrument; it is a political foundation, stabilising internally, clear externally, a pillar of our identity, perhaps even its clearest expression.”

If only the Federal Assembly had elected Heidi Z’graggen as Federal Councillor in 2019 – instead of *Viola Amherd!*

### “The ethical foundation of neutrality is peace”

Paragraph 4 of the *neutrality initiative*, which aims to enshrine Switzerland’s peace policy in the constitution, was not contested in the debate and is to be incorporated into the counterproposal. Nevertheless, two members of the Council of States emphasised the central importance of neutrality for a credible peace policy: “The ethical foundation of neutrality is peace – and in my view, peace is something that we should preserve as one of the highest maxims in this world at all times. And this ethical foundation is so central and important because in the event of war or conflict, it is not personal morality that counts, but always peace. As a neutral country, Switzerland can

contribute a great deal to this.” (*Esther Friedli*, SVP SG)

“A neutral Switzerland is also committed – and this is very important – to humanitarian, diplomatic and economic issues. In doing so, it is always impartial; not to please one side or the other, but on the basis of our laws, our values and international law. Neutrality requires prudent action; it is, in fact, the art of high impartial statecraft. Perpetual armed neutrality, combined with a clear commitment to peace, belongs in the constitution. Now is the time to enshrine it in law – as a guiding principle for a free, secure and reliable Switzerland. The principle of ‘internal security, external peace promotion’ has shaped our country for generations. It is more than a tradition; it is a promise for the future.” (*Heidi Z’graggen*)

<sup>1</sup> The construct devised by NATO hardliners states that a state’s right to self-defence entails an obligation on Switzerland to cooperate militarily with NATO/the EU or to impose unilateral sanctions against a warring party.

Source: Minutes of the Council of States meeting on 19 June 2025; <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/amtliches-bulletin/amtliches-bulletin-die-verhandlungen?SubjectId=68533#votum17>

## “Neutrality is not a changeable instrument that can be adapted as required” (Daniel Jositsch, SP ZH)

*mw.* In the Council of States, *Social Democrat Daniel Jositsch* also describes in impressive terms what Switzerland’s neutrality is all about. We reproduce part of his speech. Incidentally, *Daniel Jositsch* would also have liked to become a member of the Federal Council – a pity he has not yet had this opportunity.

“You know my position. I can summarise it in two points. On the first point: you can only be neutral in war. In peacetime, neutrality is an empty phrase.”

A former member of the National Council asked him: “How can you still be neutral in a war like the one between Russia and Ukraine?” *Jositsch’s* answer: “If you are not neutral in a war, when are you neutral?”

“On the second point: neutrality is primarily determined by what others, especially those who are at war, think of us. If they think we are not neutral, then we have a problem with our neutrality, because then it is not perceived as such by the outside world.”

“The Federal Council interprets neutrality as a changeable instrument that needs to be adapted a little. I think we need to give the Federal Council a clear line on this. Neutrality is not a changeable instrument that can be adapted as required. I have to tell you quite honestly: in my opinion, we are violating neutrality by exporting war material – we

had this discussion last week and I said so at the time. If we support sanctions that are not global and approved by the UN, I believe we are violating neutrality because we are taking a stand. Today, both are instruments with which you support a belligerent party.”

“If we have a clear text, we have a line. [...] Acceptance [of the *neutrality initiative*, *mw*] means that we may not actively participate in a war, we may not participate in a defence alliance, i.e., NATO, and we may not participate in sanctions outside of those of the UN. At least then we have a clear line, and I believe that the Federal Council needs this line. I don’t need the Federal Council to interpret what neutrality means depending on the situation.

If we agree to the counter-proposal, and I will also agree to this, then we will have a little less precision, we will have a little more room for manoeuvre. In terms of a compromise, I can certainly live with that. What is important for me, with the counter-proposal and the initiative, is firstly the clear line for the Federal Council. Secondly, I believe that we must have a constitutional provision on this so that it is also visible to the outside world.”

“It’s quite clear: if you had gone to Ukraine in peacetime, in 2020, and said that we are neutral, by the way, the Ukrainians would have said: great, we

think that’s great, neutral people are great. Since the war, the Ukrainians no longer think it’s great that Switzerland is neutral, because that means it doesn’t support them. Yes, that’s logical, it means that if our neutrality is not understood, it means that we are actually living it. Being neutral is unpleasant. When I’m in a conflict, I don’t want the others to be neutral; I want them to be on my side. Their neutrality does me no good. So, if we are not understood, we are obviously living neutrality properly. And that’s why I believe we need to have a clear constitutional provision.”

*Daniel Jositsch* explains why the narrow majority of the Foreign Affairs Committee does not want a constitutional provision on neutrality: “They are opposed to it because they want to have this possibility of interpretation, to still be able to turn a corner and say: We are now still participating in appropriate sanctions. It would like to have this option and not be forced into this corset of neutrality.

In other words, the majority [of the FAC-S, *mw*] would like to march through the world with neutrality on their banner in times of peace, and when neutrality really matters – namely in the event of a conflict – they want to keep all options open. But that’s not how neutrality works. It’s too easy, it’s too convenient. It doesn’t mean being neutral.”

# Bridges to fellow human beings and to the world

by Eliane Perret

## Living together without violence

It is ever more urgent to reflect on what humanity needs to live together in peace. Wars, the death of innocent people, the destruction of villages, cities, and livelihoods require a decisive response. How can we preserve the achievements of our culture – democracy, human rights, the rule of law, access to qualified education based on humanistic and scientific principles, and a high-quality social welfare system for all people without distinction? How can we protect children and young people from becoming targets of commercialisation that dumbs them down or ‘human capital’ of the globalised economy?

Violence and arbitrariness, which destructively penetrate many areas of our social coexistence, are excesses of misguided goals and ideologies of people and their environment who lack the necessary social and emotional prerequisites to make a constructive contribution to social coexistence.

## In the flow of humanistic thought

An attitude towards shaping our lives together based on ethical values does not develop by itself, even if humanity and cooperation are inherent qualities of human beings. It can only grow in a value-oriented environment. Its development begins on the first day of a child's life. It needs to be nourished with guidance in a caring, loving environment. The relevant knowledge and insights are available to us today – if we want to know them. They are rooted in the stream of humanistic thought that has developed since ancient times, from the Greeks to the Arabs and Romans to the early modern period, and is now supplemented and confirmed by the research findings of modern sciences. They define the responsibility of caregivers toward younger generations: Caregivers must teach children the basics of coexistence and the values and traditions of their culture, thereby cultivating the ‘garden’ for their social-emotional and intellectual development. Only in this way can interpersonal relationship skills develop. Children and young people need role models and ideals to guide their thoughts, feelings and actions – embedded in a humanely educated culture.

## Making a contribution

Children and young people naturally like to contribute to human coexistence within the scope of their possibilities. They are therefore fascinated by people who exemplify something that deeply resonates with their inner selves. This makes it all the more enriching for them to meet people they can emulate. Often without realising it, these people have a major influence on the development of children and young people.



*Pulling together: Trust in cooperation and engineering expertise make this bridge possible. (Picture screenshot; <https://vulcanostatale.it/2016/01/serial-bridge-builder-a-conversation-with-toni-ruttiman/>)*

One such person is *Toni Rüttimann*, whose life's work was featured in this newspaper two years ago in an article entitled “Building bridges between people and places”<sup>1</sup>. The article described how, in 1987, the now 57-year-old Swiss man from Pontresina – also known as *Toni el Suizo* – was so shaken by reports and images of a severe earthquake in Ecuador that he set off for the earthquake-ravaged country on the night of his graduation from the *Lyceum Alpinum* in Zuoz. He wanted to personally contribute the 9,000 Swiss francs he had previously collected in the Upper Engadine to a social project.

Supported and guided by a Dutch engineer, he built his first 50-metre-long suspension bridge and then returned to Switzerland as planned to begin his studies in civil engineering. But the question of whether he was actually on the right path with his studies plagued him in the weeks that followed. “. . . at night, alone in my room, the images from Ecuador came back to me: the lost children and the screaming people on the riverbank.”

*You want to study here for five years? You'll get used to all the comforts: three good meals a day, a nice home, friends, a girlfriend, sports, holidays. And then, after five long years, will you still be determined enough to say: Yes, now I'm ready, now I'm going to help the poor?*

At the end of the sixth week, he withdrew from the *Swiss Federal Institute of Technology* ETH, said goodbye to friends and family, emptied his savings account, and went back to Ecuador. So began his life as a bridge builder. Over the next 14 years (until 2001), he built bridges throughout Latin America. In Ecuador, Hondu-

ras, Costa Rica, Mexico, etc., 332 bridges have since crossed rivers and deep gorges.

Rüttimann then moved his activities to South East Asia after a Cambodian refugee approached him and told him about a lack of bridges in his home country. Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos became his new fields of activity, and new bridges were built. The 777th bridge in Pay Pin Taung was a very special one, as it marked the beginning of a new chapter in Rüttimann's life. He started a family, and six years ago his wife *Palin* gave birth to their daughter *Athina*. His field of activity was now Myanmar and Indonesia.

## Learning to build bridges

The life and career of Toni el Suizo impresses children of all ages. They describe him as a “cool” guy and would love to meet him in person, at least according to the results of an ethics project carried out by a secondary school class. They sent him an email inviting him to visit their class during his next stay in Switzerland. His response gave them food for thought.

Rüttimann referred to his current projects and his responsibility for them. The bridges had to be built before he could return to Switzerland: “It's nice to hear that you consider our bridge story to be something valuable. If I can hold out for another year, I'll build another 40 bridges. That will help 200,000 people. There are now 898 completed bridges, and these help 2.5 million people. Better than nothing, I think. In the meantime, it's best if you just build your own bridges wherever and however you can.”

He encouraged them to consider the following question: “Where are my bridges to my fellow human beings and to the world?” This question is particularly important for

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### “Bridges to fellow human beings ...”

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young people who are searching for themselves and their own purpose in life. A question on which they would also like to hear the opinion of adults who are important to them. And the younger pupils? Under the expert guidance of their teacher, they began to build a bridge using the Stokys metal construction sets (and in the process acquired important manual skills with wrenches, metal plates and screws). Perhaps the seed for a future career aspiration was sown?

#### Struck by fate – what now?

A person’s life rarely follows a straight path. Many children know this, especially if they have found it difficult or failed to settle into school. “Numbers, letters – what are they for, why can’t I do what comes so easily to my friend?” They are constantly faced with new, challenging tasks and unexpected difficulties, which they are required to solve and which encourage them to develop. If they succeed at school, they make progress in their social, emotional and intellectual development that they can take with them into their lives, because adult life spares no one from challenges and sometimes unexpected blows of fate.

This was revealed in the newsletter in which Rüttimann shared his projects and thoughts. I received such a newsletter in May with the title: “Struck by lightning – once again”. He wrote: “I am paralysed again. Total paralysis, from the head down, and it is the Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) again, just like 23 years ago when I was working in Cambodia. Seeing both arms, legs and feet lose all their strength and mobility within 48 hours is impressive.”

“This can’t be true,” I thought, “such an abrupt disruption in the everyday life of such a committed person. How will he cope with this difficult situation this time?” I saw before me the many children and young people I had met, who shied away from even the smallest, age-appropriate demands and were masters of evasion in a wide variety of ways – whining, tantrums and a broad range of psychiatric-like symptoms. None of that with Toni Rüttimann.

#### Knowledge and patience

He had already been ill for four weeks. After feeling a strange tingling sensation in his right hand on Friday morning, he struggled to walk up the ramp to the emergency room at the Thai state hospital on Saturday morning. The attending physician and he already suspected that he had contracted GBS again and, based on his knowledge and experience from the first bout of the disease, were able to act immediately. When he was discharged from hospital after only seven days, he knew that a long, challenging period lay ahead



*After seven weeks, 20 steps back and forth, fifty times a day. For the second time in his life, Toni Rüttimann is recovering with all his will to live and the help of friends to get well again.*

*(picture Toni Rüttimann)*

of him, during which he would have to practise sitting, standing, lifting his arms, moving his hands and holding a pen again. Muscle by muscle, with thousands of repetitions. Last time, it took two years.

Once again, my mind wandered to experiences with our students, who have to learn that it often takes patience to master a seemingly easy skill. Toni wrote about how he now uses the computer programme he developed during his first hospital stay, with both thumbs and a chopstick in his mouth, to continue designing bridges, and how he was able to translate and send the newsletter into 15 other languages using the AI programme *DeepSeek*.

#### A life-saving effect

As a young man, Toni had not simply left home without a goal. While building all those bridges, he had gained experience and built up a huge network of contacts, which now proved useful. He received sympathetic feedback from many people, as well as professional advice from doctor friends and therapists he knew in several countries. He had given hundreds of lectures and wrote: “It is impossible to know what effect these many speeches had, but one clearly had an impact, because it is now helping to save my life.”

He is referring to his impact on Alex, a young man from Ticino, whom his uncle took to a lecture by Tomi Rüttimann nine years ago. That evening changed Alex’s life. As a trained bricklayer and construction manager, he spent two months or more with Toni’s family over the past six years, helping them to build their new home on the border with Myanmar. On the seventh day of Toni’s hospital stay, after a 50-hour journey from Ticino, he arrived at Toni’s hospital, put him in a wheelchair and drove him home. “From then on, I was on the road to recovery,” writes Toni.

Thanks to their expertise in the construction industry, they were able to convert the garage of the house into a mobile crane with safety belts, “on which I initially just hung,

then gradually put weight on my bones and muscles. Now, seven weeks later, I walk 20 steps back and forth, fifty times a day.” The water reservoir now also serves as a training ground for exercising his still very weak muscles, always carefully supervised by Alex, who, with his sense of discipline, order and humour, makes sure that nothing happens to his friend. And then there is his wife Palin, who cares for him and makes sure he eats a healthy diet. His six-year-old daughter also plays her part when she asks him, “Daddy, when will you be well again? It’s already eight weeks now,” thereby reflecting his importance in her life.

#### Bridges inside and outside

“To build so many bridges without incident,” he reflects, “even in times of serious crisis, you need a handful of people you can rely on in your life.” These include *Martin*, who has been helping him remotely for years with his expertise as an electrician free of charge, or the 83-year-old woman who has been paying the salaries of all the welders involved in bridge construction for 23 years and has now also spontaneously covered the hospital costs. It is just such relationships – and people who stand up for their fellow human beings, help them, and give them confidence in difficult situations – that build bridges between people.

Or as Toni Rüttimann writes: “There is still a long way to go, and much depends on the bridges inside and outside. But we are building.”

#### What is possible

Doesn’t this example from Toni Rüttimann stand in stark contrast to the conditions in the world described at the beginning, fuelled by power struggles, arrogance, greed, and racist ideologies? It shows what is possible when people connect with each other and work together as equals on something that makes our world more humane and helps to rebuild the level of humanity that has already been achieved. For human history has shown that wherever people have achieved more peace, prosperity, justice, knowledge, education and free development, it has been when they have joined forces as equals and each individual has actively participated and taken responsibility in his own way for the good of all – and doing so while self-aware of the unique importance and value of one’s contribution toward the well-being of all. This very self-awareness of one’s unique value and significance in contributing to the well-being of all, in turn, also provides the best conditions for the free development of the individual’s distinctive personality. War and violence are then not an option! •

<sup>1</sup> “Bridges between people and places”; <https://www.zeit-fragen.ch/en/archives/2023/nr-19-19-september-2023/bruecken-bauen-zwischen-menschen-und-orten>