

# “From War to Peace”

## Symposium of the initiative “Democracy and Fundamental Rights”

by Marita Brune-Koch

Vienna. – Cruel wars in various parts of the world, politicians and the media inciting war and supposedly wanting to bring about peace with war and rearmament – that is what our world looks like today. Our Alpine republics Austria and Switzerland, which could refuse to take part in the war with their constitutionally enshrined neutrality, are increasingly arming themselves and wanting to be present at this dance of death. The symposium “From War to Peace” courageously countered this.

Hannes Hofbauer, publisher of Promedia Verlag, welcomed around 80 participants to the Martinsschlössl hall in Vienna on 11 October. He presented the “Democracy and Fundamental Rights” initiative. It is a loose association of citizens who are committed to upholding fundamental rights, freedom of expression and resistance to digital surveillance.

The programme consisted of two panels: The first panel on the topic of “From War to Peace”, the second panel on the topic of “Neutrality”.

### NATO on the scrapheap of history

The first podium discussion featured *Jürgen Rose*, a former officer in the German armed forces. In 2007, he refused, on grounds of conscience, to take part in the *Tornado* mission in Afghanistan. He is the chairman of the *Arbeitskreis Darmstädter Signal* (ADS). He is examining the question of how war can be ended through negotiations, citing, among others, initiatives by *Pope Francis*, *Viktor Orbán* and the People’s Republic of China. He criticised the EU for copying the US strategy and called for a new chapter on a rational basis.

He mentioned the danger of new weapons systems being stationed exclusively on German soil and stated that NATO was much more heavily armed than Russia. Therefore, it was not NATO that should feel threatened by Russia, but rather the other way around. NATO, the former Bundeswehr officer summarised, is an alliance for the destruction of law, nature, truth and humanity. It belongs on the scrapheap of history.



### Gaza: Condemn the genocide of women and children – regardless of political colour

*Astrid Wagner*, lawyer and committed activist in the Israel/Gaza conflict, called for a ceasefire. There are many indications of genocide in Gaza. Two thirds of the victims are women and children – this is to be condemned purely on human grounds, regardless of political colour. The children are severely traumatised. The conflict will have long-term consequences, broken minds and souls. However, engagement in this conflict is being hindered by extreme restrictions on freedom of expression. This is despite the fact that a great many Jews also reject the war on Gaza; a quarter of the demonstrators are Jews.

It is unacceptable that Austria is not taking a stand against the genocide and for a ceasefire at the UN. Instead, Foreign Minister *Alexander Schallenberg* voted against a ceasefire three times. Hannes Hofbauer interjects that this would have been impossible under *Bruno Kreisky*, who opened the door to the Arab world and welcomed *Muammar al-Gaddafi*. Why is social democracy taking this position today, he asks?

*Astrid Wagner* agrees that this is a betrayal of social democracy. Austria has many opportunities to promote peace due to its neutrality. For the sake of peace, one must also talk to *Hamas*, what else? It takes many small steps, there is no other way, but it is possible, she said in conclusion.

### Peace through war – or through a balance of interests?

*Hauke Ritz*, a cultural scientist, spoke about different “world order concepts” in different cul-

tures, with a particular focus on the comparison between Europe and America. He said that in conversations with Americans, he had repeatedly found that they could not understand the idea that values such as democracy could not be achieved through war.

The reason for this is a deep-rooted belief in America as a supreme nation, the strongest in the world. They believe in the concept of “manifest destiny”, according to which it is a universal law that the USA will automatically become stronger and stronger. This belief makes Americans less willing to negotiate. They feel they have a divine calling to lead the world. Their geopolitical position, protected between two oceans, supports the idea of their own invulnerability.

In Europe, on the other hand, the *Thirty Years' War* had led to the realisation that values cannot be achieved through war. Peace, it was realised, is only possible through a balance of interests. This led to the *Peace of Westphalia*, which is fundamental to our peace today. If we start now to adopt the thinking of the USA, to divide the world into good and evil, to wage wars for values, that would be a relapse behind the Peace of Westphalia.

From the audience, Ritz was asked about the Russian world view. Russia, according to the cultural scientist, is a huge country, it is impossible to control and defend all borders – as long as half the equator. That is why Russia developed the idea very early on that the best defence is to have only friendly countries on its borders. That is why Russia also has a university for diplomats. There are experts for every small country, every minority, every language, who are able to consider the other cultures and



Podium «War and Peace» from left: Jürgen Rose, Hauke Ritz, Astrid Wagner and host Hannes Hofbauer. (Picture jpv)



Podium «Neutrality» from left: Günther Greindl, Gudula Walterskirchen, Jean-Paul Vuilleumier, Erwin Buchinger and host Eva Pfisterer. (Picture mt)

seek solutions to conflicts through dialogue. Russia's successes in Africa are more a result of their diplomatic skills than economic investments.

### Neutrality as an alternative

The subsequent panel discussion was dedicated to the topic of neutrality – and here we could experience an exemplary cooperation between representatives of the two neutral countries of Austria and Switzerland.

*Jean-Paul Vuilleumier*, editor-in-chief of the online publication “Swiss Standpoint”, explained the significance of the Swiss popular initiative “Safeguarding Swiss neutrality”,<sup>1</sup> which was submitted in Bern in April 2024 with 132,000 certified signatures; the debate in parliament and finally the referendum are due to take place in the next few years. The aim of the initiative is to define neutrality in the Federal Constitution in such a way as to effectively prevent participation in military and defence alliances, the adoption of unilateral coercive measures (sanctions) and participation in military conflicts between third countries. According to Vuilleumier, Switzerland is no longer regarded as neutral by many countries. Therefore, our country, with its perpetual armed neutrality, should once again be available to prevent and resolve conflicts and to act as a mediator.

### Military alliances lead to conflagration

*Gudula Walterskirchen*, an Austrian historian and journalist, addressed the propaganda against neutrality. She said it consists essentially of two narratives: 1. It doesn't work without military alliances. 2. Neutrality is outdated.

Both claims could only catch on because of the lack of education and, above all, the lack of historical knowledge of many politicians (she

cited the German Foreign Minister *Baerbock* as an example). Austria has had bad experiences with military alliances. This is probably why the population is sticking to neutrality. For example, without alliance systems, the First World War would not have happened.

After the dissolution of the *Warsaw Pact*, NATO should have been dissolved. Instead, many wars were waged with it. The danger with alliances is that you also must go to war when an ally is “attacked”, which then quickly leads to a conflagration. Most countries worldwide have not allowed themselves to be drawn into any military alliances, and 120 states are non-aligned. Being neutral is therefore not outdated, but mainstream.

Return to an active peace policy

General (ret.) *Günther Greindl* argues for a return to an active peace policy. Austria became neutral with the State Treaty of 1955, and neutrality “has become our identity”. Neutrality corresponds to the *Charter of the United Nations*, which demands to spare future generations the scourge of war.

As an experienced senior officer, Greindl explained how Austria can effectively protect and defend itself without joining military alliances and also without participating in an alliance of weapons such as the European NATO air defence system *Sky Shield*. His thoughts on this can be read in the “Swiss Standpoint”.<sup>2</sup>

His conclusion: stability, one’s own defence and peace diplomacy – these three factors lead to security. Instead of joining military alliances, one should deal with the question: How can Austria return to an *active peace policy*? – A lasting peace is only possible with *Russia*.

It was an encouraging symposium that helped to clarify important questions concerning the alleged necessity of wars and military alliances. The numerous participants in the hall followed the lectures with interest and enriched the discussion with their contributions and questions.

<sup>1</sup> <https://swiss-standpoint.ch/news-detailansicht-de-schweiz/ja-zur-schweizer-neutralitaet.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.schweizer-standpunkt.ch/news-detailansicht-de-international/schuetzt-der-sky-shield-oesterreich.html>