



Webinar: Youth for Peace Initiatives in Inter-religious & Inter-convictional context

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INTRODUCTION

**By Gabriela Frey, Chair of the Committee for Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue,
Conference of INGOs, Council of Europe**

We live in exceptional times, in the midst of a technological revolution, with space exploration, genetic engineering and smartphones, where search engines provide us with more information than the entire contents of large libraries. And yet all the external technological developments, the internet, have not been able to prevent ongoing wars, racism and



destruction of the environment. These external advancements must now be offset by comparable internal developments - for the good of our own lives and that of the planet.

To make this possible, we must draw on the heritage of humanity: Methods and tools of inner development and awakening. Among the most skilful of these are a whole range of teachings from different religions and convictions.

We are inundated daily with bad news and religions no longer have good press due to the misbehaviour of some.

BUT: Its members also develop many constructive initiatives to promote dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

Our committee has already started collecting inspiring dialogue initiatives since 2021. We are now making them visible on a new website – www.niric-dialogue.eu - in order to connect them into a network and encourage people that positive developments and news are also taking place.

I am particularly happy that we can present young people who are advocating for peace in this webinar today. The Conference of INGOs has developed a youth strategy, and Ece Ciftci will now be able to tell you more about it.

WELCOMING WORDS:

Ece Ciftci, Member of the Standing Committee, Conference of INGO

Ece believes that a better world can only be achieved with civil society participation and active citizenship. She has worked as an advocate for children's access to quality education and for young people's social cohesion and representation under the UN Sustainable Development Goals. She is former Council of Europe CINGOs Youth Delegate and in April 2024 she is elected as Standing Committee Member of Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe. She is the founder of the SosyalBen Foundation, launched in Istanbul and Brussels, which has since expanded its operations to 11 countries. The foundation empowers disadvantaged youth through art, workshops, and events. She advocates inside and outside European institutions for children's rights and youth empowerment. She continues her PhD in Anthropology.

Peace and the Activities of Young People

Dear distinguished guests and young changemakers, It is a great pleasure to be here today and to contribute to this important conversation on "Peace and the Activities of Young People." I am Ece Ciftci elected member of the Standing Committee of the Conference of INGOs, I have the privilege of leading the work on youth engagement within our structure, ensuring that young people are not just participants but active contributors to shaping policies, strategies, and actions that affect their future. At the Conference of INGOs (CINGO), we recognize that youth are not just the leaders of tomorrow—they are the changemakers of today.



Our **Youth Strategy** focuses on three key pillars:

1. **Empowering young people to take an active role in civil society** by providing platforms for participation in decision-making.
 2. **Fostering meaningful intergenerational dialogue** to bridge perspectives and create inclusive policies.
 3. **Encouraging youth-led initiatives that drive social change**, particularly in areas like democracy, human rights, and peacebuilding.
- If you are **an organization working with youth**, we invite you to **join our network, contribute to our strategy, and collaborate on youth-driven projects**.
 - If you are **a young leader yourself**, there are multiple opportunities to engage, from **joining CINGO working groups to participating in our advocacy efforts and events like this one**.
 - And if you are **a policymaker or an advocate for youth participation**, we encourage you to **open more spaces for young voices and ensure their contributions are recognized at all levels**.

Young people are already shaping peace initiatives worldwide. Whether through interfaith dialogues, conflict resolution projects, or grassroots activism, their voices and actions are essential in fostering understanding, coexistence, and reconciliation. This is exactly why today's conversation matters—because investing in youth-led peace efforts means investing in a more just, inclusive, and resilient future.

I look forward to hearing from the inspiring speakers today and to continuing this conversation beyond this webinar. Today's discussion is just the beginning. Our role is not just to talk about youth and peacebuilding but to actively support and create opportunities for young people to take the lead. Let us work together to amplify youth voices, build stronger alliances, and ensure that young people are at the forefront of peace and positive change. Thank you.

SPEAKERS:

Eidel Malowicki, Eldar Šabić, Natalia Horbal, Henriette Greulich

Ethan Susser began by giving an introduction to the Muslim Jewish Leadership Council (MJLC) and their Young Ambassadors for Peace programme. He then read Eidel Malowicki's contribution (who was unable to attend).:

It's been three years that I've been the MJLC coordinator and I oversaw the launch of the first ambassador programme. Originally from the United States, I came to Austria to complete my Masters in Advanced International Studies (MAIS) and have lived in Vienna ever since. It has been a privilege to contribute to interfaith dialogue and intercultural exchange over the past three years.



In this webinar, I will introduce Eldar Sabic and the MJLC ambassador programme to allow him to share his experience of taking part in the ambassador programme.

Before Eldar's speech, I will read the statement prepared by Eidel, who was unable to join us. Eidel will explain how her multicultural upbringing as an Israeli-American raised in Vienna has shaped her understanding of the world and strengthened her commitment to interfaith dialogue. She also recounted how she had been inspired by the MJLC's meeting with the mothers of the victims of the Srebrenica genocide, who shared words of love in the face of such loss; she felt that if people who have lost so much can still show love, so can we.

These experiences helped her, and her Muslim partner Hind, to formulate a variety of interreligious initiatives, beginning with Yalla City Walks which created a walking tour of Vienna focusing on the Muslim and Jewish history of the city and how those histories intersect. This tour is unique and highlights the important contributions that Vienna's Jews and Muslims have made to the city.

Eidel and Hind expanded their initiative to include sports with Yalla City Sports which brings Muslims and Jews together to form bonds through sports participating in a number of runs throughout the year as a team including the Vienna City Marathon.

Not content with two aspects to their project Eidel and Hind launched Yalla City Talks as a third pillar of their project designed to create spaces for students and young people of various backgrounds to engage in cross-cultural exchanges both through physical events in Vienna and Milan as well as through an online platform with over 100 participants.

Eidel finally shared that "As I continue my journey with MJLC, I remain committed to enhancing interfaith dialogue. Our ongoing projects, like Yalla City Walks and Yalla City Sports, are just the beginning of what I hope will be a lasting legacy of cooperation and mutual respect among people of all faiths."

Eidel Malowicki, 22, was born and raised in Vienna into a Hassidic family. She graduated from the University of Vienna with a degree in Sociology and is now pursuing further studies in the Sociology of Religion from a quantitative angle. Her multicultural background has helped shape her cross-cultural perspective on life. Eidel is part of the Muslim Jewish Leadership Council's (MJLC) Ambassadors Programme and worked with her Muslim counterpart in Vienna to deepen the connections between their communities and organise a walking tour of Vienna focusing on the Jewish and Muslim history of the city. Eidel serves as the Vice President of the Austrian Jewish Student Union (JöH) and is an editor and author for the union's magazine, "NOODNIK." One of the union's subprojects, "Tikun Alam," aims to bring Jewish and Muslim students together through activities such as visiting religious sites. Her passionate commitment to interreligious dialogue is also evident in her close association with the interfaith dialogue project "Likrat." This project sends young Jewish individuals into Austrian classrooms to engage in open dialogues, addressing questions and breaking down prejudices. Eidel has actively participated in workshops and led events within the project since 2018. In



2014/15, Eidel was honoured to receive awards in both Yiddish and German at the multilingual speech competition "Sag's Multi." Since then, she has been part of the Alumni Club, connecting with people from diverse backgrounds and languages and forming valuable friendships. She believes that "Sag's Multi" significantly influenced her interreligious activism. In recent years, Eidel has deepened her interest in the cultural aspects of Jewishness and become involved with Yung Yiddish Wien, a cultural centre for Yiddish. She has served as a Yiddish teacher at the centre and at the University of Vienna. Additionally, she works as a tour guide at Stadttempel, Austria's oldest surviving synagogue, and has recently taken on the role of Antisemitism Commissioner at the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF)."

Declaration from Eidel Malowicki (read by Ethan Susser):

The Sanzer Rebbe, my great-grandfather from eight generations ago, once said that he initially wanted to change the world. But then, he realized that in order to change the world, he first needed to change his country. As he thought more about it, he realized that to change his country, he needed to change his city. When he considered changing his city, he understood that the key was to first improve his community and the people closest to him- his friends and family. And finally, he came to the realization that before he could change anything else, he had to begin by changing himself.

This is a story I was raised with, among many others. I grew up hearing the stories of my pious ancestors, whose resilience was revered through the hardships of pogroms, suffering, and the Shoah. But they were also stories of richness – scholarly richness and a wealth of wisdom.

But these weren't the only stories I was told. My life was also shaped by cross-cultural perspectives. My mother is American, my father is Israeli and I was born and raised in Vienna. My multicultural background has deeply shaped my understanding of the world and strengthened my commitment to cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue.

The Journey with MJLC

It all began with a phone call. Before I knew it, I was sitting across from Hind Hafuda at the kosher restaurant *Mea Shearim*, soon to become my partner in many ambitious interfaith projects. But before starting our work together, MJLC brought us to Bosnia.

In Bosnia, I had the opportunity to meet Imam Eldar Šabić, the Muslim ambassador of Bosnia. Our journey took us to Srebrenica, where mass graves stand as silent monuments to the victims of genocide. The tragedy deeply moved me. I reflected on the words of the president of the Mothers of Srebrenica Association, who told us, "We do not teach our children hatred, but love." How is it possible that women who have lost everything can find such words of love? If those who have lost everything have managed to do so, then we can as well. They are the best-practice example. We are stronger than hate. The trip to Srebrenica ended with a powerful joint Muslim-Jewish prayer.



Yalla City Walks & Storytelling

“Yalla City Walks” are interactive Muslim-Jewish Walking Tours through Vienna. These walks highlight shared moments of intersection between the Jewish and Muslim communities in the city. Through stories, we explore the rich contributions of Jews and Muslims and how they intersect in contemporary debates. For example, we tell the story of Mohammad, a Muslim doctor who saved a Jewish woman, Anna, during the Holocaust. Participants also enjoy traditional Jewish and Muslim foods like Burekas, Baklava, Kipferl, and Zeit-ua-Zatar during the walk.

Extension of Project to Yalla City Sports

The journey didn’t stop with walks. We took our passion into the world of running. I biked to Bratislava to organize a Muslim-Jewish block at the Women’s Run, where participants from both communities came together for an important cause. While the event itself was full of powerful moments of connection, it was also adventurous – we even found ourselves stuck in quicksand! We continued to mobilize Jewish and Muslim participants for other major events, such as the Austrian Women’s Run, Vienna City Marathon, Peace Run, and Uni-Run. By mobilizing participants from diverse backgrounds – both religious and secular, young and old – we demonstrate how sports transcend religious divides.

Yalla City Talks

“Yalla City Talks” focuses on facilitating dialogues between Muslim and Jewish communities. We held interfaith exchanges in Milan and Torino, where we met with religious leaders and community members to reflect on shared values and build a foundation for further collaboration. During our time in Milan, we met with Imam Yahya Pallavicini and the Chief Rabbi of Milan, and in Torino, we participated in the European Day of Jewish Culture at the main synagogue. Our work also extended into educational programs like Erasmus+ and "Dialog auf dem Teppich" (Dialogue on the Carpet), where we created opportunities for cross-cultural exchange between students and young people from various backgrounds. In addition to our physical events, we created an online platform that allowed us to bring together over 100 people who share a commitment to Muslim-Jewish cooperation. Through this online group, we were able to share posts and updates about interfaith initiatives.

Looking Ahead

As I continue my journey with MJLC, I remain committed to enhancing interfaith dialogue. Our ongoing projects, like Yalla City Walks and Yalla City Sports, are just the beginning of what I hope will be a lasting legacy of cooperation and mutual respect among people of all faiths. This journey – starting with small, personal transformations – has become a way for me to contribute to the change I want to see in the world, one step at a time. Together, we possess the power to demonstrate that compassion and solidarity can become our prevailing principles, stronger than any conflict. Peace means having no fear. We must give meaning to these values that surpass the power of hatred. In this pursuit, I wish to walk this path and



warmly invite you to join me hand in hand. And if my counterpart can at least smile, there's already a bit of Shalom there.

Eldar Šabić, 21, was born and raised in Breza, a small city near Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Currently, he is a student of Islamic Theology in Sarajevo. When not studying, Eldar serves in mosques as an imam and religious preacher.

Eldar is part of the Muslim Jewish Leadership Council's (MJLC) Ambassadors Programme, he worked with his Jewish counterpart to organise a group of young Muslim and Jews from Sarajevo to visit other Muslim and Jewish communities across Bosnia to establish connections. Eldar's team also organised a concert in Sarajevo showcasing Muslim and Jewish culture. The multicultural and multireligious environment of Sarajevo, along with the openness of Islam towards other religions and cultures, has inspired Eldar to engage in interreligious dialogues and projects. He actively spreads the idea of interreligious dialogue with his colleagues at college and among the people he preaches to. Eldar is currently working with his mentor and colleagues on revitalising the relations between Muslims and Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina by learning about their common past. The rich multireligious history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, coupled with beautiful examples of multireligious practices in Islamic history, such as those in Madina and Andalus, serve as his inspiration."

Intervention of Eldar Šabić:

Distinguished participants of the webinar "Youth for Peace Initiatives in Inter-religious & Inter-convictional Context," It is both an honour and a pleasure for me to address you today as one of the Muslim ambassadors of the Muslim Jewish Leadership Council's (MJLC) Ambassadors Programme. I extend my gratitude to the representatives of the Committee for Interreligious and Inter-Belief Dialogue, the esteemed Gabriela FREY and Lilia BENSEDINE THABET, for granting me this opportunity and placing their trust in me to share my perspectives and responses to some of the questions related to today's webinar. A special thank you also to Dr. Thea Mohr, today's moderator, for the valuable guidance and advices she provided during our Zoom meeting.

In the announcement for this webinar, it was stated that many people in Europe feel insecure in their lives and worried about the future. Thea and Gabriela mentioned to me that one of the questions we need to address is: **What kind of impact do youth organizations want to have on Europe and society?** One of the answers is that young people engaged in various interreligious and inter-convictional organizations aim to help society overcome the issues outlined in the webinar introduction. They seek to create an atmosphere of peace where everyone feels comfortable. They strive to enhance security, ensuring that fewer people feel unsafe and anxious. They aim to combat hate speech and discrimination. They want to be a force that promotes decency, compassion, and mutual understanding. These are precisely some of the values we learned during the MJLC Ambassadors training held in Sarajevo last year, in 2024, which I will elaborate on later.

The *first* thing I want to talk about is the answer to the question: What motivates young people to engage in peacebuilding activities within religious organizations?



I cannot speak for all young people, but for myself and the environment in which I work, the **answer is simple: religious teachings.** What my grandmother taught me as a child, I later confirmed as a student of Islamic theology—only with more scholarly terminology: our faith teaches us not to hate the other or those who are different. Our faith teaches us to live in peace with others and to promote peace. Isn't the message of all great world religions that we should wish for others what we wish for ourselves?

One of the key points of this webinar is that hate speech and discrimination have become part of everyday life—and that is indeed true, even in religious contexts. However, hate speech and discrimination are not the result of what religions teach or expect from their followers. Speaking from my own faith, Islam, I can affirm that hate speech and discrimination are contrary to Islamic values. In the holy book of Islam, the Qur'an, it is said to the believers: *"And tell My servants to say that which is best."* And in another verse, describing the servants of God, it states: *"[They are] those who walk humbly upon the earth, and when the ignorant address them harshly, they respond with words of peace."* Are not those who spread hatred, discrimination, and incite hostility the truly ignorant - those to whom the best response is peace?

The role model and the man whom Muslims follow, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), once said: *"A true believer is not involved in taunting, or frequently cursing (others), or in indecency or abusing."* Similarly, Prophet Muhammad taught his followers that a true believer, when speaking, either speaks good or remains silent. **Kind speech and refraining from insults, curses, and offensive language are upheld as moral ideals in all great world religions.** And yet, despite this, we witness that hate speech is deeply embedded in our societies, even among those who call themselves believers. However, one thing is certain: their religion does not teach them this. It is a product of their failure to control their own tongues.

The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as: "Any kind of communication in speech, writing, or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are—in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender, or other identity factor." It is not harmless when hate speech becomes louder and spreads across stadiums, political gatherings, online platforms, classrooms, workplaces, and everywhere people move, meet, and communicate in writing. Hate speech directly threatens peace and disrupts social harmony because it is a dangerous rhetoric that actively promotes and incites terrorism, hatred, violence, xenophobia, racial discrimination, torture, starvation, persecution, and ethnic cleansing.

However, we must not retreat in the face of this challenge. It is our duty to respond to hate speech with truth and peace. Our task is to condemn hate speech, expose it, and continuously



advocate for meaningful and constructive dialogue. What we realize today more than ever is that dialogue has no alternative.

The interreligious context is the primary space where contemporary religions exist, and without dialogue, religions cannot define themselves, fulfil their mission, or even survive. A Muslim reads the following words in his holy book, the Qur'an: *"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily, the most honoured of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted with all things."* What is this, if not practical guidance for eliminating all forms of discrimination? Humans are created to know one another, not to hate one another. **Religion protects human rights, defends the vulnerable, and stands against racist ideologies.** There is no discrimination based on gender, colour, or race. That is the answer to one of the questions addressed in this webinar: Can religions and faith-based organisations be a refuge and source of support in very troubling times? Yes, they should. I firmly believe that religious communities must work to promote true universal values such as respect, tolerance, sincerity, kindness, and, above all, peace. This is precisely what two religious communities in Sarajevo—the Muslim and Jewish communities—recognized when they sent their representatives to participate in the MJLC training, where, among other topics, special attention was given to understanding and combating hate speech. From that we come to my next topic.

The *second* topic I want to address is the **project** realized by a group of representatives from Bosnia and Herzegovina. As part of our project, **"Unity in Diversity,"** a group of young representatives from the Muslim and Jewish communities of Sarajevo travelled together to cities across Bosnia and Herzegovina to learn about and witness our shared history—one filled with **examples of coexistence and peace among people of different faiths and beliefs.** At the same time, this project reflects one of our greatest aspirations: by learning from these inspiring historical examples of peace and coexistence, we hope to instil the same values in future generations.

The history of Bosnia and Herzegovina is full of such examples; it serves as a beacon, demonstrating how people of different faiths can live and work together. One key indicator of this legacy is the **continuous coexistence of Jews and Muslims,** which is at the heart of our project. Even in the darkest times, during World War II, Bosnian Muslims risked their lives to protect their Jewish neighbours from the Holocaust. They signed petitions and resolutions condemning hate speech and violence, striving to preserve peace, security, and shared life. On the other hand, during the aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s, the Jewish community saved the lives of their Muslim neighbours. This is the essence of Sarajevo as the "European Jerusalem"—an identity affirmed by both history and the present. Through projects like this, we aim to ensure that this idea is not only remembered but actively lived and passed on to future generations. In an age where prejudice and hatred are on the rise, we



must offer a counter-narrative by sharing these positive examples that demonstrate how **diversity is a treasure and that coexistence is the only path to peace and a fulfilling life.**

Allow me to conclude, as the *third* part of my speech, by sharing the story of **Derviš Korkut**—a Bosniak hero whom Yad Vashem posthumously honoured as Righteous Among the Nations on December 14, 1994. At the beginning of 1942, as a curator at the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Korkut took great risks to save the **Sarajevo Haggadah**—a 15th-century Jewish manuscript brought to Bosnia and Herzegovina by Sephardic Jews who had settled in Sarajevo, then part of the Ottoman Empire. The Haggadah is a Jewish ritual book, specifically a codex, containing biblical stories, prayers, and psalms read during Pesach (Passover), commemorating the liberation of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery. Derviš Korkut recognized its immense historical and religious significance and took steps to save it during the German occupation. When Nazi commander arrived at the museum to seize the Haggadah, Korkut hid it beneath his coat, ensuring it would not be found during the search. Later, he discreetly left the museum and entrusted the precious symbol of Jewish heritage to a Muslim imam living in the countryside. The imam hid it in his mosque's library, where the Sarajevo Haggadah—one of the most famous illuminated Hebrew manuscripts—remained safely concealed until after the war.

Beyond saving the Haggadah, Korkut also rescued a Jewish high school girl named **Mira Papo**, whose parents had been taken to a concentration camp. Derviš and his wife, Servet, disguised her as a Muslim girl, claiming she was an Albanian sent by her relatives to help in their home. After spending several months under their protection, Korkut managed to secure her travel documents and arranged for her escape to Dalmatia, where she later joined the Partisans and remained with them until the war ended. The story of Derviš Korkut was one of the many inspiring accounts we shared during our travels as part of the "Unity in Diversity" project, which I mentioned earlier.

In five different cities, young Muslims and Jews visited together and met with representatives of religious communities, who shared testimonies of interfaith coexistence from their respective cities. They also introduced us to the present-day situation and their visions for the future, which, as they emphasized, cannot be built without a proper understanding of the past and a commitment to meaningful dialogue.

Derviš Korkut's story, which you can read in a short English-language book, is not an isolated case. I highly recommend reading about the "Sarajevo Purim" and watching the film "Sevap/Mitzvah." History, as the teacher of life, is filled with both examples of peace and violence. But the young generation is determined to build peace and that is the best answer to the question raised in this webinar. We will build peace by focusing on stories like these and preserving the legacy of unity and coexistence. We spoke about this same idea, and I will conclude my speech with this thought, at a **joint spiritual music** concert held at the end of last year in Sarajevo. This concert, as the culmination of the "Unity in Diversity" project, gathered



representatives and members of both religious communities through music—the universal language that conveys the deepest emotions and sentiments. We may express these feelings in different ways, but they all carry the same message: **peace, never violence**. Thank you all for your attention.

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Natalia Horbal, Associate Professor of Lviv Polytechnic National University (Ukraine); NC of EFECW-Ukraine. Natalia Horbal graduated from Lviv Polytechnic National University (specialization «Management of foreign economic activity»), received PhD in «Management and Marketing» in 2001. She is an Associate Professor and Deputy Head on International Activities of the Foreign trade and customs department of LPNU (<https://lpnu.ua/en>). Natalia is a coordinator from LPNU of Erasmus+ projects: 2023-1-DE02-KA220-VET-000152737 «GPS@VET – Guiding toolkits for Professional Skills enhancement in VET»; 2024-1-TR01-KA220-VET-000246582 «Creation of e-guidance via an innovative set of tools for professional know-how enhancement at VET»; 610641-EPP-1-2019-1-UA-EPPJMO-MODULE «EU competitiveness boosting: circular economy»; as well as CERV projects (CERV-2023-CITIZENS-TOWN-NT) «Her Voice, Her Power, Our Future! Women Leading the Way to Sustainability» and «Solidarity Across Towns». Natalia is as well a National Coordinator for Ukraine of Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women (<https://www.efecw.net/>) and was its Coordinating Committee Member in 2018-2022. https://wiki.lpnu.ua/wiki/Nataliya_Horbal

Intervention of Natalia Horbal: Living Your Youth During The War

First of all, I would like to thank Dr Thea Mohr, Gabriela Frey and the other organisers of this event for inviting me to participate in it. This is a great chance to share our pains and hopes from the warzone as well as to express our deep gratitude to all Europeans supporting and helping us in this dark period!

I would like to start by describing the general consequences of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (24/02/2022). According to the United Nations at least 12,654 civilians have been killed and 29,392 injured since 24 February 2022. Children accounted for 673 of those killed and 1,865 of those injured. The total amount of direct damage to Ukraine's infrastructure has reached almost \$200 billion. At least 790 attacks have damaged or destroyed medical facilities and 1,670 have damaged or destroyed educational ones. An estimated 139,000 square kilometres of Ukraine are contaminated. Russian authorities have subjected Ukrainian prisoners of war to systematic and widespread torture. About three quarters of the interviewed released civilian detainees witnessed that they were tortured or ill-treated.

In the occupied territory of Ukraine, in violation of the laws of occupation, Russia has:

- Imposed its systems of governance, law enforcement, judiciary, administration and education;
- Forced residents to obtain Russian citizenship and passports.
- Subjected residents to forced conscription and conducted propaganda;



- Compelled children to be loyal to Russia, including by teaching them military skills for future service. Russian authorities have restricted the freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and opinion, and freedom of assembly. Members of religious groups opposing Russia its armed attack against Ukraine have been detained and sentenced to prison terms or deported.

The number of Ukrainian refugees in Europe is almost 6.2 million, young people make up 36% of the Ukrainian citizens currently enjoying temporary protection in the EU (the share of young women is 60%). The number of internally displaced persons remains at around 3.5 million.

Now let us analyze the impact of war on the Ukrainian youth.

Current situation, aspirations and concerns.

The war has exacerbated most of the problems that have been a concern for young people, but has also revealed new ones – compulsory military service, restrictions on movement, power outages, loss of housing/property.

According to the survey in 2024 significant proportion of young people (79%) reported experiencing losses due to the war. One in five people is concerned about the impossibility of finding a job and/or the loss of relevance of their profession. At the same time, Ukraine's labour market is adapting to wartime conditions: the share of unemployed youth has decreased from 11% to 9. The attractiveness of entrepreneurship is growing: from 34% to 37%. At the same time, the severity of losses from the war has increased comparing to 2023: - the proportion of young people who reported the death of friends or family members increased from 14% to 28%; - who reported a breakdown in relations with friends or family members increased from 18% to 27%, indicating a significant destruction of social ties; - who have mobilized family members increased from 9% to 21%.

42% of young people in Ukraine are most concerned about health, both their own and their families'. Other important challenges include lack of money (31%), lack of free time (26%), physical safety (26%), mental health (25%), opportunities for self-realization (23%), and compulsory military service (20%). For Ukrainian youth abroad, mental health issues have come to the forefront of their concerns (61%). Over the past three years, family happiness (67%) and health (60%) have consistently been the highest ranked life goals of Ukrainian youth. Interestingly, in 2024, freedom and independence in their actions became even more important to young people: the share of respondents who indicated that they are important increased from 52% in 2023 to 56% in 2024 (compared to 28% in 2021)

28% of respondents reported a deterioration in mental health as a result of the war. At the same time, a positive trend is the growing willingness to receive free psychological help: 34% of young people would seek it. This suggests that seeking psychological help is no longer so stigmatized; as well over a longer period since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the manifestations of stress, anxiety, and trauma have accumulated to the point where more and more young people feel ready to seek psychological help.

Due to the return of some refugees and a decrease in the intensity of migration processes, the proportion of those experiencing family separation (from 18% to 14%) and difficulties in



moving to other settlements (from 16% to 13%) has decreased. The share of IDPs among young people amounts to 18. There has been an increase in the prevalence of war-related injuries (up from 6% to 9%), loss (up from 5% to 8%) or damage to housing (up from 6% to 8%) as a result of the war. Similar trends can be observed in the assessment of losses by young people who have moved abroad; although young people abroad are more than twice (68%) as likely to mention psychological health problems among the losses caused by the war. Possible reasons, in addition to family separation (67%), include loss of social ties, difficulties with integration, feelings of guilt, and isolation.

The general deterioration in public sentiment in 2024 comparing to 2023 was also reflected in the moods of young people. The following changes were recorded:

- Decrease in trust in all institutions, including state ones (except the Armed Forces): e.g. the President (from 91% to 52%), the Verkhovna Rada (from 52% to 16%) and the judiciary (from 40% to 17%). Trust has decreased in civic/volunteer organizations (from 88% to 83%) and the media (from 56% to 34%); and among young people abroad it has decreased even more. At the same time, trust in the Armed Forces is the highest (91%).
- Decrease in the proportion of young people who do not want to leave Ukraine – from 66% to 58%. Therefore, if the military situation does not improve, the outflow of refugees may increase again. Many people want to leave only for a period until the war is over. However, dissatisfaction with the political situation in Ukraine also plays a role: among those who want to emigrate, 20% cite the lack of democracy and the rule of law.
- Decrease in the proportion of Ukrainians who plan to return to Ukraine – from 66% to 32%. This can be explained by: intensification of the mobilization campaign for men, protracted hostilities and the subsequent occupation of some territories, loss of housing and property, and the arrangement of their lives abroad.

Despite the deterioration in public sentiment, youth volunteerism has increased significantly: while in 2023 42% of young people were engaged in volunteering, in 2024 – 51%. This is mainly fundraising for the Armed Forces. At the same time, there is a positive trend in non-military volunteering: helping IDPs and refugees (from 20% to 23%), raising funds for other non-military, charitable purposes (from 17% to 23%), organizing and collecting humanitarian aid (from 15% to 18%), and helping those in need (from 13% to 18%). This is a rather unique situation for Ukraine: despite the deterioration in sentiment, civic engagement is growing, so Ukrainian society faces the challenge of realizing this potential and preserving it in the postwar period.

Despite the expansion of youth volunteerism in 2024, the level of its institutionalization decreased: awareness of opportunities to participate in decision-making at community level, the existence of children's and youth NGOs in Ukraine and their activities, and participation in political organizations and youth centres decreased (from 20% to 13%). Only 2% of young people participate in youth councils. At the same time, visitors to youth centres have become more active. Volunteer activity has also increased among refugees abroad, from 44% to 50%, despite a decrease in the desire to return.

In general, despite the deterioration in public sentiment both in Ukraine and abroad, Ukrainian youth remain united around common values as a result of the full-scale invasion:



- Foreign policy orientations: 83% support joining the EU, and 77% support joining NATO.
- The value of territorial unity: 71% of respondents would not agree to give up the territories occupied at the time of the survey for the sake of peace, while only 14% are ready to make such compromises. Among young people living abroad, 65% are against concessions, while 22% support the idea of giving up the territories.
- The value of national identity attributes: 52% of respondents reported an increase in the importance of consuming Ukrainian content, 47% each said the same about speaking Ukrainian and knowing and honouring the history of Ukraine, and 45% said they buy Ukrainian-made goods and services. Refugees abroad also report an increase in the frequency of these practices. A complete boycott of the Russian cultural space continues to be supported by the majority of respondents (72%). The share of those who prefer to speak Ukrainian increased (from about 55% to 65%).

The role of youth in the stabilization and recovery processes.

According to the Ukrainian youth the main factors for the stabilization in the country are:

- improvement of material well-being, adaptation of the labour market to military conditions; - growth of volunteer activity of young people both in Ukraine and abroad;
- unity in political values: a focus on joining the EU and NATO, the desire for territorial integrity of Ukraine;
- the importance of national identity attributes: the growing importance of consuming Ukrainian content, communicating in the Ukrainian language, and buying Ukrainian-made goods and services.

Meanwhile, the main factors of destabilization for Ukrainian youth are:

- the growth of conflicts, intolerance, breakdown of relationships, discrimination (trigger topics include staying abroad, evasion of mobilization, russian language and culture, and stigmatized groups);
- continuation of the trend towards deterioration of mental health; - deterioration of public sentiment, decreased trust in all institutions except the Armed Forces; - increased emigration sentiments among young people in Ukraine, and reluctance to return among young people abroad.

So far young people, despite their considerable potential, are hardly involved in the reconstruction and recovery processes. And this potential is gradually fading away: there is a clear correlation between the decline in trust in local authorities and a decrease in their willingness to personally participate in the recovery of their communities (from 72% in 2023 to 59% in 2024). Most research participants stated that, for them, recovery means the physical rebuilding of houses, roads, educational and medical facilities, as well as energy and utility infrastructure. In intangible terms, it is a change of government or cleansing it of corruption, restoration of employment opportunities, and restoration of social ties and cohesion in communities. At the same time, in 2024, only a third of young people surveyed (32%) feel that they can personally influence changes in their community, while more than half (58%) do not. 59% expressed a desire to get involved in the reconstruction and recovery of their



communities, but only 0.4% had such experience. As noted above, youth volunteerism increased in 2024. At the same time, the problem of institutionalizing the volunteer potential of young people remains, as well as overcoming distrust in state institutions that should coordinate the reconstruction and recovery process. Thank you for your attention!

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Henriette Greulich is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Politics and Constitution at the University of Dresden, Germany. During her studies, she studied abroad at universities in Wrocław, Poland, and Jerusalem, Israel, focusing on peace and conflict studies, as well as the impact of international organizations and civil society. She gained firsthand experience in peacebuilding through an internship at URI-MENA in Jordan, where she worked on interreligious initiatives promoting dialogue and conflict resolution. She has worked extensively in the field of political education, contributing to several organizations dedicated to democracy promotion, civic engagement, and youth empowerment. Beyond her academic and professional engagements, she actively advocates for youth participation at the European level. She serves as the Chairperson of the World Student Christian Federation in Europe (WSCF-Europe) and represents the organization as the Head of Delegation to the Conference of INGOs at the Council of Europe. She is also a member of the Synod of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD), where she represents the Protestant Student Federation in Germany.

Intervention of Henriette Greulich: Living our faith together for justice

Good afternoon, everyone! It's a true honour to be with you today. I would like to begin by warmly thanking the Committee for Interreligious and Inter-Confessional Dialogue of the Conference of INGOs for organizing this important webinar and for inviting me to speak. I'm grateful for the opportunity to share some reflections and experiences from a youth perspective.

"Living faith together for justice." This is the guiding vision of the World Student Christian Federation, a global movement that unites young people across cultures, continents, and confessions. It is a call to live out our faith not in isolation, but in community. Not in comfort, but in commitment. A commitment to justice, to dialogue, and to peace. It is in this spirit that I speak to you today - rooted in faith, grounded in youth perspectives, and focused on a future that urgently needs both.

In the minutes ahead, I will share why youth participation in peacebuilding is not only valuable but absolutely essential. I will explore how interreligious dialogue, especially when youth are involved, contributes to social cohesion in divided societies. We will look honestly at the challenges young people face when trying to build peace and also at the powerful opportunities that exist when their voices are truly included. I will share concrete initiatives from my experience with WSCF-Europe and beyond, and I will conclude with practical recommendations on how we can all better support young people in shaping a more peaceful



world. Because when we live faith together for justice, peace is not a distant dream, it becomes something we create, every day, side by side.

Core Dimensions of Youth Engagement in Peace and Dialogue

a) Why Youth Participation in Peacebuilding Matters

Youth are often seen as passive recipients of peace efforts rather than active agents of change. However, research and international frameworks recognize their crucial role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015)¹ was a landmark moment in acknowledging youth as key stakeholders in peace and security. It emphasized that sustainable peace is unattainable without the meaningful participation of young people.

Studies, such as the "The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security"(2018)², highlight how youth-led initiatives contribute to conflict prevention and social cohesion. Young people often bring innovative approaches, digital activism, and grassroots engagement to peace efforts, making them invaluable contributors to both local and global peace initiatives. Additionally, intergenerational collaboration strengthens these efforts, as young people challenge traditional power structures while also learning from experienced peacebuilders.

Despite their potential, young people frequently face exclusion from decision-making processes. Structural barriers such as tokenism, lack of institutional trust, and limited access to resources hinder their full participation. Addressing these issues requires systemic changes in governance, funding mechanisms, and institutional frameworks to ensure youth voices are not only heard but also acted upon.

b) The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in Social Cohesion

Interfaith dialogue has long been recognized as a powerful tool for promoting mutual understanding and reducing tensions between communities. In pluralistic societies, religion can be both a source of division and a means of reconciliation. Research such as the article "Interreligious Dialogue, Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding" (2025)³ demonstrates that structured interfaith engagement fosters trust, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence.

Additionally, a 2021 study on religious diversity and social cohesion⁴ found that societies with active interfaith dialogue programs experienced lower levels of sectarian violence and stronger community bonds. By bringing together individuals from different religious

¹ <https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/unsc/2016/en/109527?utm>

² <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/missing-peace-independent-progress-study-youth-and-peace-and-security?utm>

³ <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/16/2/150?utm>

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386566482_Interfaith_Dialogue_as_a_Tool_for_Combating_Discrimination_Theological_Insights_and_Practical_Applications



backgrounds, these dialogues help break down stereotypes, address historical grievances, and build a shared commitment to peace.

For youth, engaging in interreligious dialogue provides a space to explore their own beliefs while learning about others. Programs that incorporate young voices create long-term networks of peacebuilders who champion tolerance and mutual respect.

However, challenges such as politicization of religion, intergenerational resistance, and lack of funding for youth-led interfaith initiatives persist.

Youth participation in peacebuilding is a powerful force for conflict resolution, but it is not without its obstacles. One of the key challenges is the limited access young people have to decision-making processes. They are often sidelined in policy discussions, reducing their ability to influence peace agreements and political resolutions. Additionally, many youth-led initiatives struggle with financial sustainability, making long-term impact difficult to achieve. Even when youth are invited to participate in institutional frameworks, their involvement is often symbolic rather than substantive, leaving them without real decision-making power. In conflict-prone areas, young activists advocating for peace may also face security risks, making it difficult for them to engage safely in their work. Moreover, young people today are growing up in a digital landscape shaped by information bubbles and the spread of fake news, which can reinforce division and mistrust rather than dialogue and understanding. The lack of safer, inclusive community spaces, both online and offline, can further isolate youth and make it harder for them to engage in meaningful interreligious and intercultural encounters. These dynamics pose significant barriers to youth empowerment and to the broader goals of peacebuilding.

Despite these challenges, there are numerous opportunities for youth to contribute meaningfully to peacebuilding. Digital activism has emerged as a powerful tool, allowing young people to amplify their voices and mobilize for peace across geographical and political boundaries. Online platforms provide a space for dialogue, advocacy, and grassroots organizing, enabling youth to create significant change even in restrictive environments. Youth networks and grassroots movements, such as those led by WSCF, foster collaboration and empower young leaders to take charge of peace initiatives in their communities. Moreover, with increasing global recognition of youth's role in peace and security, young people are gradually gaining entry into decision-making processes at international and national levels. The UN Youth, Peace & Security agenda, for example, has created pathways for youth to contribute directly to policy discussions and implementation. By addressing the barriers to youth participation and leveraging these opportunities, peacebuilding can evolve into a more inclusive and effective movement that is driven by the creativity, resilience, and commitment of young people.

Concrete Examples from WSCF and Personal Experience

Let me now move from theory to practice, because peace is not just a concept, it's a lived experience. And it starts in the everyday.

The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) is one of the oldest international youth movements. Founded in 1895 in Sweden by students from ten North American and European countries, it has since grown into a truly global network. As an ecumenical youth movement, WSCF



brings together Student Christian Movements (SCMs) from across all regions of the world. These local and national movements work at the intersection of faith, social justice, and youth empowerment.

I speak today on behalf of WSCF-Europe, the European regional body of WSCF. We are proud to act as a bridge - between grassroots activism and international engagement, between students of different Christian denominations, and between diverse perspectives across our continent. Our aim is to provide young people with spaces for critical reflection, open dialogue, and transformative action.

One of our most important current projects is our 2025 annual initiative "Frame the Future", which is focusing entirely on the theme of peace. The idea emerged from conversations with our member movements in 2024, where we heard a clear concern from young people: peace is not an abstract concept for them. It is personal.

Whether directly affected by war or witnessing the impact on friends and families, -especially in light of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine - peace, or the lack thereof, shapes their daily lives. But we also recognized something else: many young people across Europe are unaware of the full picture of past and ongoing conflicts on the continent. The mainstream narratives often emphasize war—but not peace. It also emerged as a major concern from our 2024 project Share the care; our survey on mental health highlighted that wars and conflicts considerably affect young people's mental health and well-being. So with "Frame the Future", we want to flip that script. We want to explore peace as an active process, not just the absence of violence. We want to tell the stories that don't make headlines: about reconciliation, coexistence, and collective healing. To do that, we will learn from those who have experienced conflict transformation, in the past and present of Europe, through what we call "scoping missions" to Poland - where we learned about post World War II reconciliation processes, but also about what happens to a country when their neighbour is invaded, by listening to the experience of NGOs supporting Ukrainian refugees. We will visit the Corrymeela community in Northern Ireland, to understand sectarian violence in Ireland and Northern Ireland, focusing on the religious and identity nature of the conflict, exploring how the peace process developed, the role of ecumenical organisations in de-escalating the conflict. Then we will visit the Sami people in Finland, to learn about the role of Churches in the colonisation of the Arctic and the current truth and reconciliation process. In October, we will hold a youth event about peacebuilding in Sarajevo.

Across all our programs, WSCF-Europe is committed to creating safer spaces for young people to learn and grow. For us, a safer space is not a neutral space. It is an intentional one. It's a space where people are respected, where diverse identities are affirmed, and where disagreement does not mean disrespect. We work with a code of conduct, set group agreements at the start of our events, and ensure the presence of pastoral care and diversity officers. These structures may sound technical, but they are deeply spiritual acts of care. They make space for everyone to show up as they are. Further, our methodology is rooted in non-formal education and human rights education. We don't position young people as empty vessels to be



filled with knowledge. Instead, we affirm that each participant comes with their own experiences, wisdom, and needs. In this sense they are not just learners, they are co-creators. Another essential part of our peace work is interfaith collaboration. We are well aware that as a Christian organization, our perspective is not complete on its own. That's why we regularly partner with other faith-based youth organizations like EYCE (Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe), JECI-MIEC (Catholic student organizations), and FEMYSO (Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations). By inviting participants from diverse faith backgrounds to our events, we foster honest dialogue, respectful disagreement, and mutual understanding. And when we talk about peace, this is vital. Peace cannot be built in echo chambers, it grows where difference is welcomed.

Let me now briefly share from my personal experience beyond WSCF. During my time in Jordan, I worked with URI MENA (United Religions Initiative - Middle East and North Africa). URI MENA brings together grassroots interreligious groups across the region, people from different faiths who live in the same neighborhoods, who go to the same markets, but who might otherwise never talk about the things that matter. What I witnessed there was powerful: simple, local projects that became spaces of transformation. We worked with youth and women's groups, often those who had little access to resources, knowledge, or platforms to express themselves. Through workshops and community gatherings, we created opportunities for empowerment and connection. One of the most moving tools we used was storytelling. It's astonishing what happens when people start sharing their personal stories across differences. Suddenly, abstract conflicts become human again. A young woman's story about displacement, or a man's experience of reconciliation after violence - these touch something deeper than facts. They remind us that peace is not just a policy goal. It is about people. And behind every conflict, every statistic, there are lives, families, hopes, and dreams.

These initiatives, from WSCF-Europe's regional projects to interfaith grassroots work, demonstrate how peacebuilding begins at the local level but must be supported by broader structures. They show that grassroots action and policy engagement are not opposites, but two sides of the same coin. When young people are empowered to share their stories, shape dialogue, and challenge existing narratives, they contribute not only to healing in their communities but also to shaping policies that reflect lived realities. Building on these experiences, I would now like to offer some concrete recommendations for how we can enhance youth participation in peacebuilding.

Recommendations for Enhancing Youth Participation in Peacebuilding

One of the core areas of work of the World Student Christian Federation is advocacy, which is why I would like to conclude with several recommendations on how to better include young people in peacebuilding. To meaningfully enhance youth participation, we must act on multiple levels. At the institutional level, young people need structured roles within policymaking spaces, such as youth advisory councils or co-decision mechanisms, so their voices are not only heard, but also valued in shaping the frameworks that govern peace and dialogue. Equally important is sustainable funding and capacity building: youth-led and interfaith initiatives often rely on temporary grants or voluntary energy, but lasting impact requires consistent support, training, and trust in youth leadership. Finally, on the grassroots level, we need inclusive



platforms where young peacebuilders can exchange experiences, amplify local knowledge, and shape narratives beyond token participation. Only when these levels interact, when grass-roots energy meets institutional openness, can youth participation become not the exception, but the norm in peacebuilding efforts.

Conclusion

Let me return to the opening quote that guided us today: “Living faith together for justice.” For us, this is more than a slogan -it is a vision. A vision of a world in which the voices of young people, of those who are vulnerable, of those treated unjustly and denied the dignity every human being deserves, are not just heard, but embraced. A world in which these voices, grounded in faith, come together, across differences, across generations, across borders, to bring love, justice, and peace. Young people are not on the margins of peacebuilding; they are at its heart. Their courage, creativity, and commitment to dialogue shape more just and inclusive societies every day. But they cannot, and should not, do it alone. It is our shared responsibility to ensure that their contributions are not limited by structural barriers or symbolic inclusion. This is a call to action for all stakeholders, policy-makers, religious leaders, civil society, and international institutions, to recognize, resource, and support the leadership of young people in peace processes. If we want to frame the future differently, if we truly believe in living faith together for justice, then the time to empower youth is not tomorrow. It is today

FINAL WORDS

Dr. Gerhard Ermischer, President of the Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe

I'm very happy about this cross-actual seminar because it's organized by the committee for interreligious and inter-convictional dialogue but it is especially on the young people so it's together with our use strategy represented by Ece Ciftci.

I think the theme we are talking about is unfortunately extremely relevant in this very moment and the latest news. All of you have heard about the last attack in Ukraine on Sumy and not just there but in so many other places around Europe and the vicinity of Europe shows that in this very moment our world is anything but peaceful and the strategy we have created on Council of Europe is one of those strategies to guarantee a certain amount of respect for democracy human rights, the rule of law and with that also for peace simply falling apart in this very moment.

Just last week during our general assembly we have to react to so many of these crises and make so many declarations and recommendations on so many issues from Ukraine to what is her happening in Turkey what is happening in Serbia what is happening in Georgia just to name a few inside the Council of member states.

So I very happy that we have this still this group of people who come together and talk about these issues and especially that we have young people who come together and talk about these issues who try to find solutions and to take also encouragement from good examples



from the past to show that it is possible it depends really on us and on our will to make it possible but it is possible and we must not lose that that belief and that deep feeling in ourselves that it can be achieved and that it disperse while fighting for that. Thank you.

Lilia Bensedrine-Thabet, Co-Chair of the Committee for Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue at the Conference of INGOs:

We would like to thank you very much for your testimonials, which were full of courage, creativity, solidarity and hope. You have told us and shown us how important dialogue is to prevent conflict - not to resolve conflict, but to prevent it.

Develop a discourse of dialogue to counteract a discourse of prejudice, hatred and rejection of our cultural, religious and convictional differences Show the richness of the diversity of our Humanity

You have stressed the need to extend dialogue to the whole of society, from political decision-makers to civil society, so that it can be aimed at everyone and not just at elites, and the importance of developing teaching and education for dialogue.

You also told us how important it is for dialogue movements to be really close to the grassroots, to offer opportunities for events that bring together people of different religions, cultures and beliefs, for example: dinners, meetings, visits to different places of worship, sporting events, concerts, etc.

All these events that need to be organised are challenges to overcome the many challenges that exist, instabilities of all kinds, and resistance to dialogue, and we know today that these are present, such as the increase in the rejection of people of other cultures and religions and its political exploitation, the lack of safe places to engage in dialogue, the lack of financial and human resources to develop strategies for dialogue, and so on.

Inter-religious and inter-faith dialogue is closely and strongly linked to peace and justice. There can be no dialogue without justice, and there can be no peace without dialogue and justice. This webinar was a testament to courage, a testament to hope, and thank you very much indeed.