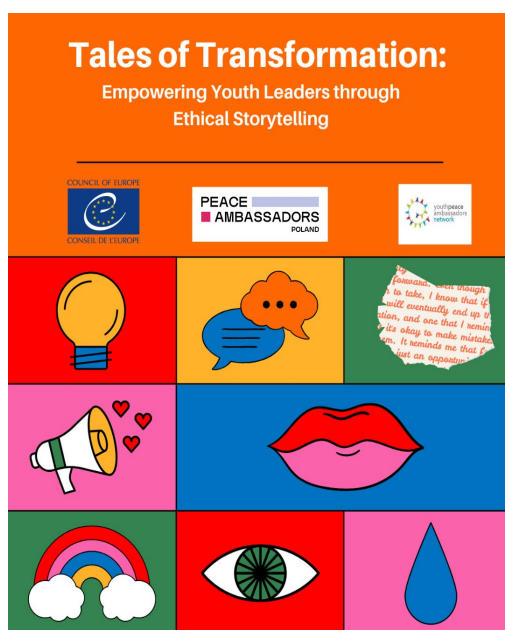


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Strasbourg, 15 July 2025



Report of the Study Session held by the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network

In co-operation with the
Peace Ambassadors Poland, planIMPACT e.V., Deixant Empremta, Local Peace
Leposavić and the Youth Department of the Council of Europe

European Youth Centre Strasbourg
19-24 May 2025

TALES OF TRANSFORMATION - YPAN Study Session 2025

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I. Executive summary

The Study Session **“Tales of Transformation: Empowering Youth Leaders through Ethical Storytelling”**, was organised as a cooperation between the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network, with Peace Ambassadors Poland, planIMPACT - Verein für Menschenrechte, Frieden und Entwicklung e.V., Deixant Empremta, Local Peace Kosovo and the Youth Department of Council of Europe., from the 18th to the 25th of May 2025 at the European Youth Centre Strasbourg of the Council of Europe.

This study session falls within YPAN's long-term strategic priorities to support young people with knowledge, skills, time, resources and space to become agents of change and peacebuilders with tools for active citizenship. Cooperation and work toward mutual values of peace and stability will pave the way for long-term change, in which the participation of young people is crucial.

The aim

To empower youth workers and young leaders working with youth from conflict-affected communities, by equipping them with storytelling and media literacy tools to counter dehumanizing narratives of war and conflicts, and to act as multipliers of human rights and peace.

The study session had the following objectives:

- To understand key concepts of human rights, peace, conflict, conflict transformation and peacebuilding.
- To discuss and understand the realities of young people from conflict affected communities, specifically focusing on dehumanizing narratives about war and conflict, which are often part of their lived experiences.
- To improve media literacy among participants, and strengthen participants' ability to recognize and critically analyse dehumanizing narratives in media.
- To enhance the storytelling, ethical and non-violent communication abilities of the participants as a way to share compelling narratives of conflict-affected individuals, highlighting human rights issues and peace initiatives
- To disseminate art and storytelling materials prepared by the participants in the form of an online festival, where participants showcase their newly developed skills and competencies to a broader audience via the social media accounts of YPAN and EYCS.

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- To plan at least 5 follow-up actions and strengthen cooperation among participants beyond the boundaries of the study session.

During the “Tales of Transformation” study session held at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg, 26 young participants from across Europe came together to explore the role of youth in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. The session provided a space for participants to critically reflect on the challenges they face in their communities, including political tensions, personal and societal conflicts, and a lack of awareness or tools for engaging in ethical storytelling and transformation processes.

Many participants shared in their applications that they regularly encounter barriers to peace; ranging from unresolved political conflict and interpersonal tensions to widespread disinformation and the absence of peace education in their communities. They also expressed a need for increased competencies and resources to become active agents of change.

Through participatory learning, sharing of lived experiences, and storytelling, participants deepened their understanding of peacebuilding, developed greater appreciation for cultural diversity, and strengthened their commitment to ongoing international cooperation. Together, they identified youth-led advocacy, non-violent communication, and ethical storytelling as key approaches to transforming conflict narratives and building a sustainable culture of peace.

As a key outcome of the session, the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network (YPAN) and the participants recommend the creation of more inclusive and accessible spaces for young people to exchange experiences, reflect on their realities, and co-create cross-border initiatives aimed at promoting peace and human rights.

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Group picture of the participants of the Study Session

II. Introduction

This report is prepared by the facilitator's team of Tales of Transformation Study Session and contains information about each phase (preparation, implementation and evaluation of the activity). It represents all the details about the three mentioned phases of the study session and gives further insight on participants and their follow up projects.

The background to the session

Peace remains a vital precondition for individual well-being, societal development, and global progress. It directly influences the quality of life by shaping the conditions for education, health, social inclusion, and economic opportunity. While the Global Peace Index consistently identifies Europe as one of the most peaceful regions in the world, numerous complex and fragile peace processes persist across the continent. These include post-conflict transitions in the Balkans and in the context of the Kurdish population in Turkey; frozen conflicts in places such as Cyprus, Moldova and Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh; and ongoing armed conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine. In parallel, rising social tensions and polarisation within European societies add new layers of challenge, particularly for young people.

YPAN recognizes that peacebuilding cannot be achieved without addressing these issues

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in a comprehensive and inclusive way. Youth, in particular, are often among those most affected by the consequences of violence and conflict, yet are simultaneously powerful agents of change. However, their access to meaningful spaces for expression, dialogue, and peace advocacy remains limited. Recent years have shown that increased military spending and economic instability lead to budget reductions in education and social services further marginalizing young voices- especially those from vulnerable communities.

This study session, *Tales of Transformation: Empowering Youth Leaders through Ethical Storytelling*, was developed in response to the urgent need to equip young peacebuilders with tools to address these realities. Supported by the Council of Europe and held at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg, the activity brought together 26 young participants from across Europe for a six-day intensive programme. The session focused on enhancing participants' competences in storytelling, media literacy, and ethical communication - tools essential for deconstructing dehumanising narratives and creating more inclusive, empathetic dialogue around conflict.

YPAN and its partners identified several key learning needs through previous consultations and capacity-building processes. These include:

- **Countering Dehumanising Narratives:** Youth face a media landscape filled with conflict-driven stereotypes and polarising discourse. There is a need to develop critical skills to challenge these narratives and promote nuanced, human-centred stories.
- **Creating Safe Spaces for Expression:** Youth require supportive environments to process their experiences and express their perspectives creatively through art, storytelling, and dialogue, as a form of personal and collective healing.
- **Transforming Online Discourse:** In an age where misinformation spreads rapidly, young people must be equipped to advocate for ethical journalism and promote digital narratives rooted in empathy and truth.

Storytelling, especially when grounded in ethical and inclusive frameworks, offers a transformative tool for building mutual understanding and peace. When young people are given the space and support to share their stories, they not only reclaim their narratives but also contribute to healing, solidarity, and social cohesion. Through this session, participants explored how stories can challenge dominant paradigms, humanize experiences of conflict, and spark new avenues for dialogue and cooperation.

The initiative aligns with YPAN's long-term strategic goals to empower youth with the knowledge, skills, and space to be active citizens and peace advocates. By strengthening intercultural dialogue and youth-led activism, the study session contributed to the broader Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda and the Council of Europe's mission to promote

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peace, democracy, and human rights.

The profile of participants number and other information

YPAN ensured a diverse and balanced group of participants, representing various backgrounds, geographic regions, and experiences in the field of youth and peacebuilding. The selection was based on country of residence, motivation, experience in peace-related work, and potential to act as multipliers. Priority was given to young people working with conflict-affected communities and those facing social or economic barriers. Gender balance and cultural diversity were key considerations.

Participants were youth workers and young leaders aged 18–30, active in youth organisations, informal groups or movements, particularly those involved in conflict transformation and human rights. They demonstrated motivation to enhance their skills in ethical storytelling and media literacy, and a commitment to apply their learning in local follow-up actions. A good command of English and readiness to fully engage in the programme were essential.

The call was widely shared through social media, and YPAN's and partner organization's networks. We received 52 applications, from which 26 participants were selected. All selected participants were asked to contribute their experiences and ideas for peacebuilding, and to carry forward the outcomes of the session in their communities.

Details on participants of the Study Session

How many participants did you apply for?	26
How many people applied for the study session?	53
How many participants were finally invited?	26
How many participants did actually attend?	26
What was the gender distribution of the participants: male/female/other	9 M / 17 F
What was the average age of participants?	27
What was the average age of the preparatory team?	30

Number of participants by country of residence

Armenia	2	Georgia	3	Poland	4
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Azerbaijan	2	Germany	3	Portugal	2
Belgium	3	Hungary	1	Türkiye	4
France	3	Lithuania	2	Kosovo ¹	2

Participants were expected to:

- Demonstrate a strong interest in peacebuilding, human rights, and ethical storytelling;
- Be motivated to apply newly acquired skills within their communities or organisations and multiply the impact;
- Be strongly motivated and available to fully engage in the study session and collaborate towards achieving the session's objectives and expected outcomes;
- Be interested in applying the acquired skills and knowledge within their communities or organizations to promote peace, respect, tolerance, empathy, and inclusivity;
- Be committed to implementing follow-up actions after the event;
- Possess a working knowledge of English (minimum B2 level);
- Express interest in developing and showcasing creative outputs such as storytelling exhibitions;
- Be capable of acting as multipliers of peace and human rights education;
- Be open to learning from intercultural dialogue and peer exchange.

Presentation of the organisers

Youth Peace Ambassadors Network:

The Youth Peace Ambassadors Network (YPAN) is an informal network of young peacebuilders across Europe who work with and in conflict-affected communities. The mission of the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network is to develop a culture of peace by empowering young people and promoting human rights, dignity, equality and respect for diversity through education, advocacy and other non-violent actions. The YPAN brings together 140 young people from the countries of the Council of Europe and beyond. Members of the Network are involved in working with and for young people within different structures: organisations, institutions, and informal groups.

¹ All references to Kosovo, whether the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

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The creation of the YPAN is the result of a long-term project (entitled Youth Peace Ambassadors Project) that was proposed by the Advisory Council on Youth and endorsed by the Joint Council on Youth of the Council of Europe in 2010. During various phases of the project, its participants took part in several training sessions on competencies in peacebuilding, conflict transformation and intercultural dialogue. In November 2012, a networking conference took place where the first steps towards the establishment of the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network were taken. You can read more about the Council of Europe project at: [YPAN](#). Over time, more members have joined the network based on specific recruitment criteria and requirements.

Peace Ambassadors Poland:

Peace Ambassadors Poland Association (PA Poland), a local branch of the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network, is dedicated to promoting a culture of peace and nonviolent conflict transformation. The organization connects young people actively engaged in human rights-oriented actions, focusing on areas such as human rights, gender equality, peacebuilding, activism, and human rights education. Through non-formal education projects, Peace Ambassadors Poland facilitates training for future human rights educators and multipliers at local and international levels. The organization also conducts information campaigns and various forms of activism, including media literacy and combating disinformation. With expertise in LGBTQ+ and Refugee rights, Peace Ambassadors Poland contributes to building inclusive, tolerant, and safe communities.

Since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis on the Polish border with Belarus and amidst the full-scale aggression of Russia in Ukraine, our members have been deeply involved in helping refugees and raising awareness about the situation on the Polish borders. As an association, we have organized activist projects such as KA1 Erasmus+ Visuals for Migration and local actions such as Crafts for the Border. We are also partners in KA2 Erasmus+ projects like YPAN Peace Fellowship and Youthwork for Rehabilitation of Young People Affected by War and Armed Conflicts, focusing on advocacy and Trauma-Informed Youthwork. Our team includes researchers, artists, and youth workers actively working with people affected by war and migration traumas. Looking ahead, we are committed to continuing our work in this field and are eager to explore new approaches while integrating existing methods to provide enhanced assistance and combat violence and polarization within our communities. As part of the YPA Network, our mission is to empower youth and advocate for human rights, dignity, equality, and diversity.

planIMPACT Verein für Menschenrechte, Frieden und Entwicklung e.V.:

planIMPACT e.V. is a Germany-based non-profit, non-governmental organization and a local branch of the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network. As planIMPACT, we share a vision of an inclusive society in which people live in dignity and dialogue and strive for a more peaceful future. Our mission is to develop a culture of peace by promoting human rights, peace and democracy, stand up for the reduction of prejudices and a free and equal society and set an active beacon against any form of discrimination by empowering

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young individuals and raising their knowledge and capacities in different areas.

planIMPACT works on providing a platform for self-aware, forward-thinking and engaged young people to ensure that they are well-informed and equipped to address challenges or misconceptions, reshape narratives, stand firm against any form of discrimination and human rights violations and bring about lasting changes. For this, the organization focuses on the topics of: Human Rights, Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding Education; Equality+ and Inclusion; Environment and Sustainable Development; and Arts and Digital Citizenship Education.

Deixant Empremta:

Deixant Empremta 2019 was created with the purpose of empowering people from two different localities (Solsona and Cardona), through international mobility and nonformal education as a tool of personal and professional development. Furthermore the organisation strives to create new opportunities for people with special needs, working on their inclusion in our society through different art workshops.

All the members of Deixant Empremta have great experience in volunteering (local and international). And we strongly believe in the power of volunteering and helping. Our association is based in a rural area, where it is not easy to develop projects for young people. We would like to work on developing critical thinking through intercultural exchange, keeping in mind the inclusion of all the collectives in our society and understanding how the differences among us can enrich our society.

Their goal is to change the perspective of a close-minded area, working on values such as morality, respect and empathy. They know the power of the associations in our society and are conscious that their area has a bunch of them but have detected that most of them are working on their own. They are therefore working on empowering the local associative fabric, which can make it easier to go forward with their main objectives.

The link between the session's theme and the Council of Europe

The study session had a direct link to the objectives of the 2022–2025 Youth for Democracy programme, with a primary focus on “Living together in peaceful and inclusive societies.” The study session also connected media literacy and the lessons learnt from the No Hate Speech Movement. Moreover, the study session reflected key priorities of the 2030 Agenda, particularly the goal of building peaceful and inclusive societies.

The study session was built on the Council's legacy of supporting young people as agents of change, equipping them with the tools, knowledge, and spaces necessary to actively shape just and democratic societies. Our work was rooted in the belief that young people, as active citizens, play a vital role in defending human rights, encouraging intercultural dialogue, and promoting diversity and social cohesion. Exploring innovative, inclusive, and effective methods for youth to advance these values is essential. These

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principles are not only central to the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network but also echo the core mission of the Council of Europe, under the influence which the YPA Network was established. By focusing on ethical storytelling and media literacy, the session responded to growing concerns over hate speech, misinformation, and polarization, phenomena that threaten the democratic culture and social cohesion promoted by the Council of Europe.

In the programme there was a dedicated part to introduce the Council of Europe work and its activities. During the session the participants could explore the work of the Youth Department, European Youth Foundation, documents and instruments of the Council of Europe in regard to CVE/CVR. Stefan Manevski, former educational advisor at the European Youth Centre Strasbourg and current member of the Anti-Discrimination Department, delivered a comprehensive session on the Council of Europe's efforts to combat hate speech and promote anti-discrimination. He introduced participants to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) standards, the No Hate Speech Movement, and self-regulation mechanisms in the media. This session created valuable links between grassroots ethical storytelling efforts and broader institutional frameworks addressing online harm, discrimination, and polarisation. Participants gained insights into how their local activism can connect to, and be supported by, the Council's work in this field.

Moreover, the programme worked majorly with the Council of Europe educational resources, such as Compass, T-Kit 12: Youth Transforming Conflict, The Education Pack: All Different–All Equal, Bookmarks, and We CAN!. These tools underpinned experiential learning and reflective learning spaces in which participants explored how storytelling can be used to prevent hate speech, challenge harmful narratives, and act as multipliers of human rights and peace.

III. Content of the Study Session

The topic and main contents/issues discussed

The study session *Tales of Transformation: Empowering Youth Leaders through Ethical Storytelling* worked to equip young peacebuilders with the knowledge, tools, and ethical reflection necessary to recognize and counter dehumanizing narratives, while amplifying stories that foster peace, human rights, and empathy. The programme addressed key themes such as youth-led peacebuilding, ethical storytelling, trauma-sensitive practices, media literacy, and intercultural learning; using participatory and non-formal education methods grounded in human rights and conflict transformation principles.

The programme combined conflict transformation, human rights education, trauma-sensitive approaches, and media literacy in order to equip young people with practical tools and ethical reflection for creating impactful stories in their communities.

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It was specifically tailored for youth leaders and youth workers coming from or working with conflict-affected communities, equipping them with tools to recognize and counter dehumanizing narratives of war and violence, and to serve as multipliers of peace and human rights.

The core content was structured to follow a pedagogical and emotional progression: starting from conceptual groundwork, moving through the exploration of harmful narratives and biases, into the ethics and practice of communication, and finally into creative storytelling and planning for real-life action. The methodology was rooted in non-formal education principles and encouraged experiential learning, peer exchange, and critical reflection throughout the programme.

A central theme of the study session was ethical storytelling, which participants approached through sessions on power dynamics in narration, the responsibility of the storyteller, and trauma-sensitive practices. Through practical exercises and case studies, they examined the risks of retraumatization, appropriation, and binary framing, and learned how to centre dignity and agency in their storytelling work.

Participants were introduced to key elements of media literacy, including detecting bias, recognizing and countering dehumanizing frames, and identifying manipulative visual techniques in digital and traditional media. These skills were connected to the broader peacebuilding goal of resisting narratives that perpetuate division and violence.

Throughout the week, the group also worked on co-creating stories using different formats such as visual art, collage, audio, and performative storytelling. These activities allowed participants to embody their learning, express their positionalities, and produce creative outputs that were later showcased in the final Festival held at the European Youth Centre Strasbourg.

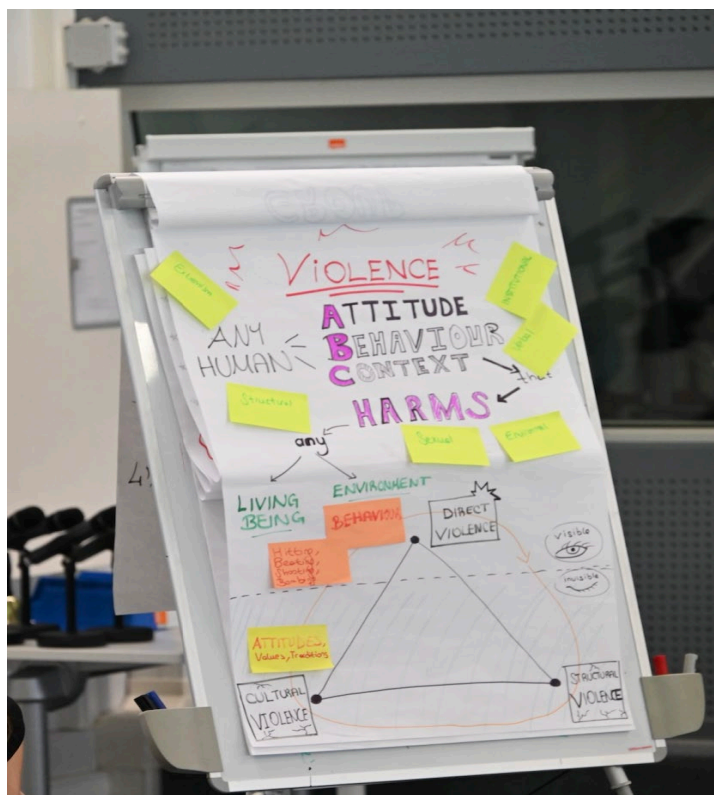
The main building blocks of the programme of the study session day by day were:

Day 1 – Foundations of Peace, Conflict, and Human Rights

The study session began by establishing a common conceptual foundation. Participants explored key terms such as peace, conflict, violence, human rights, and conflict transformation, using participatory, experiential and reflective methods. These initial discussions revealed the diverse lived experiences and realities of participants, which enriched the dialogue and set the tone for intercultural and peer-to-peer learning throughout the week.

The exercise revealed diverse interpretations of these concepts, shaped by the participants' lived realities; some spoke of direct violence and displacement, while others focused on structural and cultural violence based on Galtung's framework. These perspectives deepened the group's understanding and brought into focus how peacebuilding is deeply contextual. These conversations created space for mutual recognition and helped establish a learning environment grounded in respect and curiosity.

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Flipchart Galtung's ABC Triangle of Violence

Day 2 – Deconstructing Dehumanizing Narratives and Media Bias

This day focused on identifying and analysing the types of dehumanizing narratives that often shape the experiences of youth in conflict-affected areas. In “Mapping Dehumanizing Narratives”, participants worked in small groups to reflect on how war, violence, and conflict are represented in their communities and countries. They explored narratives around victims, perpetrators, and heroes, and discussed how such narratives reinforce polarization and trauma.

Next, in the “A Well-Biased Media Diet” session, participants learned the basics of media literacy by examining how different types of bias, including selection bias, confirmation bias, and framing, operate in media reporting. They analysed coverage of the same conflict by various outlets and became more aware of how language and visuals shape public perception.

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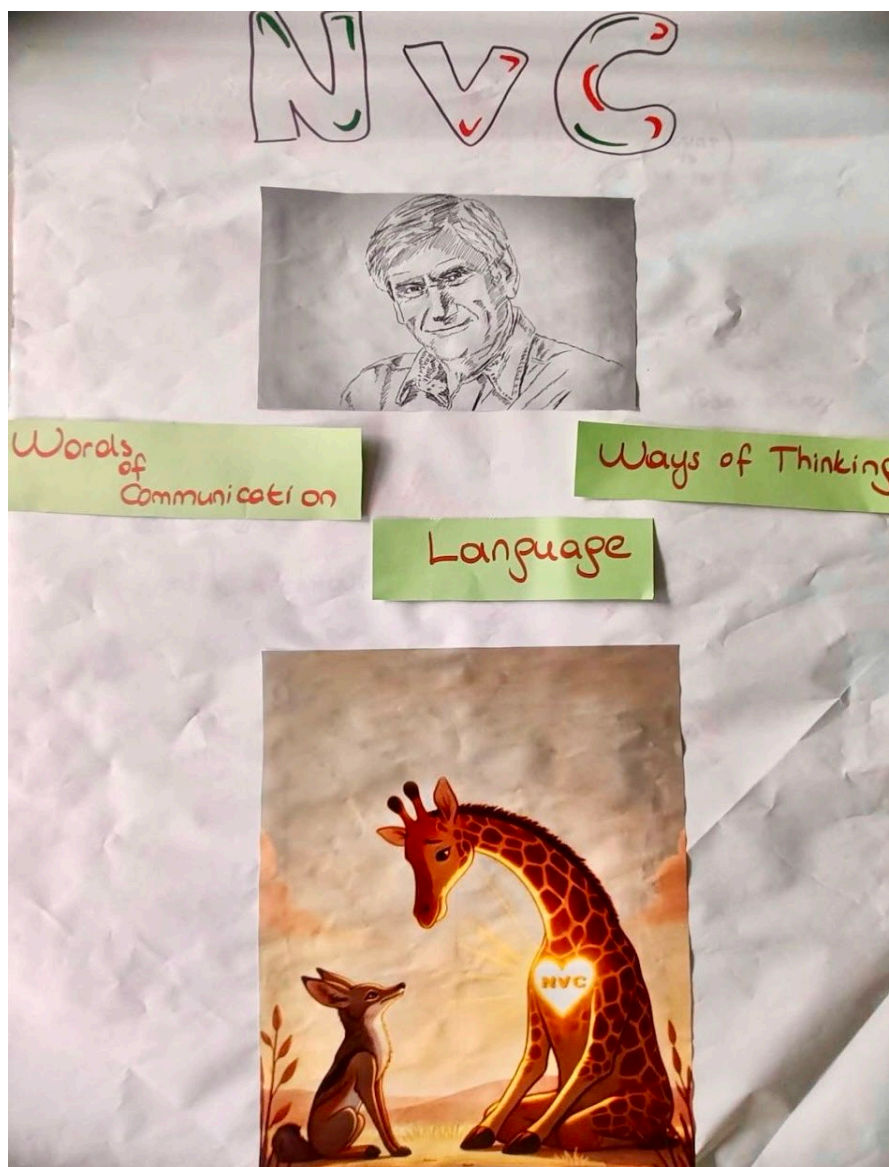
Presentation slide - Types of Bias

The afternoon sessions built on these discussions. “Know Your Narratives” and “Through Your Eyes” helped participants further explore how stories and narratives reinforce social norms or resist them. These sessions encouraged empathy and critical thinking, essential components of ethical storytelling.

Day 3 – Ethics of Communication and Council of Europe Standards

Wednesday was devoted to ethical and responsible communication, both interpersonally and digitally. The day began with an interactive introduction to Nonviolent Communication (NVC), focusing on its four components — observations, feelings, needs, and requests. Participants shared personal examples and practiced communication that fosters connection and empathy in conflict situations.

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Flipchart Marshall Rosenberg Nonviolent Communication

This was followed by “Media Literacy and Ethical Communication Online”, where participants explored what responsible digital behaviour looks like in times of conflict. They discussed hate speech, disinformation, and algorithmic echo chambers. Together, they co-created a set of Ethical Communication Guidelines, reflecting shared values and principles to use in their future peace narratives.

A key highlight of the day was the expert input from Stefan Manevski, former educational advisor at the European Youth Centre and a current member of the Council of Europe’s Anti-Discrimination Department. In his session titled “The Work of the Council of Europe in the Field of Hate Speech and Anti-Discrimination”, he introduced participants to ECRI standards and tools for combating hate speech and promoting equality, including media self-regulation. This institutional perspective added depth to the day’s focus and helped participants understand how their storytelling practices could align with European human rights frameworks.

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The work of the Council of Europe in the field of hate speech and anti-discrimination session with Stefan Manevski

Day 4 – Ethical Storytelling in Practice

The fourth day was dedicated to the power and responsibility of storytelling. Building on the foundation of the last days, participants engaged in an in-depth exploration of storytelling as both a pedagogical and peacebuilding tool.

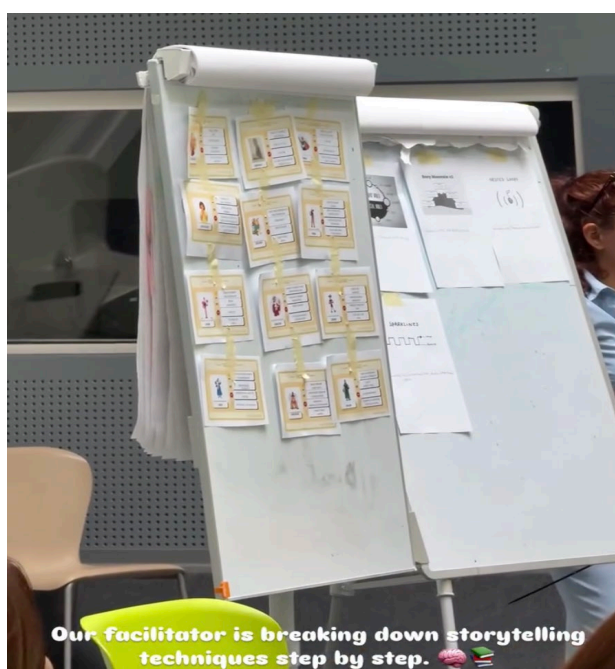
The morning began with an inspiring session led by guest speaker Erion Krasniqi, an activist and peace educator from Kosovo. In his session titled “The Power of Storytelling”, Erion shared his work with divided communities in post-conflict Kosovo. Drawing from both personal experience and professional practice, he emphasized how storytelling can be used for reconciliation, dignity restoration, and peacebuilding, but also how it can reinforce victimhood or deepen division if used irresponsibly. Participants were deeply moved and engaged in a rich dialogue about the ethics of telling stories that are not one’s own.

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The participants created the following **Guidelines for Ethical Communication Online**:

1. **Raise Awareness**
Share information to inform and educate others about important issues.
2. **Include Disclaimers**
Clarify intentions and provide context to avoid misinterpretation.
3. **Explain Possible Harm**
Highlight potential impacts or risks of certain content or actions.
4. **Speak from Personal Experience**
Use "I" statements (e.g., "I think..."), not "we"—do not speak on behalf of groups without consent.
5. **Present Diverse Perspectives**
Encourage open-mindedness by introducing alternative viewpoints respectfully.
6. **Avoid Interacting with Harmful Content**
Do not engage or amplify harmful posts—attention can fuel their spread.
7. **Report Harmful Content**
Use platform tools to flag and report violations of community standards.
8. **Fact-Check Information**
Verify claims before sharing to prevent misinformation.
9. **Verify Sources**
Ensure the credibility and reliability of the information's origin.

In the afternoon, "Storytelling Techniques", introduced Drawing from narrative theory and Jungian archetypes, the session unpacked the anatomy of stories, examining how narratives shape collective memory, identity, and perceptions of the "other." After going through the "Storytelling Practice" session, participants began drafting their own stories. Using creative writing, visual art, and spoken word, they developed ethical narratives based on either personal experience or imagined characters grounded in real-world conflicts.



Materials on the Storytelling Techniques (YPAN Instagram Story)

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Day 5 – Transforming Stories into Action

As the study session progressed, the focus shifted toward action and sustainability. Participants were guided through the process of developing follow-up plans tailored to their communities.

The morning started with “Follow-Up Ideas Preparation”, a session aimed at transforming the participants’ learning into concrete project ideas. Participants worked in groups through the “Local Action Canvas” tool developed by YPAN, to develop local or international initiatives that apply ethical storytelling in youth work, peace education, or activism. Many projects were linked to their local contexts and included podcasts, zines, community exhibitions, or digital campaigns.



Sessions on Follow up actions planning - YPAN Local Action Canvas

Later, the group finalised their storytelling outputs for the Online Exhibition, a digital initiative hosted by YPAN. These creative pieces included poems, digital art, and personal testimonies, and were curated for dissemination via social media platforms. Participants took ownership of the editing and presentation of their work, developing not only technical skills but also confidence in their storytelling voice.

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Storytelling Festival exhibition prepared by the participants (YPAN Instagram Story)

In the afternoon, the group visited the Council of Europe's Palais de l'Europe, where they reflected on how their work connects with broader structures and frameworks of the organization.

Day 6 – Presentations, Consolidation, and Closing

The final day began with the “Follow-Up Presentation” session. Participants shared their project ideas and storytelling creations with the group, receiving supportive feedback and suggestions for improvement. This served as a soft launch of their work and marked a transition from reflection to action.

Next, participants took part in “Reflection on the Learnings”, where they synthesized key concepts from the week and identified how they can use these insights in their youth work, activism, or educational roles. Many reflected on the personal transformation they had undergone, in how they perceive stories, conflict, and their role in shaping narratives. The project ended with a collective evaluation and farewell.

Methodology

This project has been created to serve as a life-long learning process, both for facilitators as well as the participants, where everyone is expected to learn not only during the implementation but also back in the local realities as a way to apply the knowledge acquired in the project and to improve the situation of their different communities. During our preparatory meetings we designed methods tailored to the needs and expectations of the participant using a wide array of materials developed by YPAN, ensuring an integrative approach will be used during the session. During the

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Study Session, we used various non-formal learning and participant-oriented approaches.

The program flow reflected interactive and participatory methods, including team-building activities, interactive lectures, role play/simulation, case studies, expert input, discussion, community mapping, thematic workshops on the tools of Storytelling, Media Literacy, Non-Violent Communication, LSD (Learning Space Dynamics) session on exchange of practices and tools, world café, open space, and reflection groups. The methodology of the study session was based on the approaches of human rights education that is “About, Through and For Human Rights”. The tools of the Council of Europe, such as “Compass”, “We Can”, and “Bookmarks”, are some of the tools which were used for promoting cooperative learning, participation and learning through experience in activities.

We have also used the tools developed by Youth Peace Ambassadors Network, such as the YPAN Book of Peace Design and Youth in Conflict (Setting). Being aware that non-formal education is about skills, knowledge and attitudes, we wanted to ensure values of inclusivity, gender equality, culture of peace, respect towards different cultures, religions, backgrounds, sexual orientations, and apply methods promoting inclusion, intersectionality and empathy. The created learning process was focused on encouraging participation, contribution, and the desire to work together to elaborate individual and common ideas of applying received knowledge and skills and enabling future cooperation.

Main highlights from the programme

One of the strengths of the Study Session was the flexible structure which made it possible to meet the needs of the participants as well as the completeness and variety of the topics and styles of activities proposed.

In fact, one of the elements appreciated by the participants for the entire duration of the Study Session was the alternation of theoretical sessions with some based on artistic storytelling techniques. We feel this created a climate of great creativity and collaboration.

The storytelling tools and methodologies explored during the study session supported youth-led peacebuilding and conflict transformation efforts at the grassroots level. The sessions were grounded in nonviolent communication principles, trauma-informed approaches, and intercultural learning. Through this, participants strengthened their capacities to construct and share narratives that challenge dehumanizing representations, offer counter-perspectives rooted in empathy and dignity, and amplify the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

Quoting participants:

“The session provided a deeper understanding of how storytelling can be a powerful tool to humanize experiences in conflict-affected communities”.

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“Better understanding of NVC, storytelling techniques and ideas in including arts in the processes”.

By bringing together a diverse group of youth leaders and activists, the session created a platform for intercultural dialogue, mutual learning, and the co-creation of artistic outputs, such as digital stories and peace narratives, that reflect a shared commitment to promoting peace, defending human rights, and celebrating diversity. These outputs were designed for public dissemination through the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network's, strengthening the visibility of youth peacebuilders and multiplying the session's impact.

The participants were also extremely engaged in a speech by Erion Krasniqi who provided a concrete example of effective reconciliation meetings based on the use of storytelling.

A highlight of the program was the visit at the Palais de l'Europe and having an opportunity to get to know the insights of the Council of Europe's work in confidence building in regions affected by conflicts.

In essence, the session served not only to promote Council of Europe values at the local and grassroots levels but also to connect young people across borders, build alliances, and encourage them to become multipliers of ethical communication and peaceful coexistence in their own communities. As we write the participants are already multiplying these with their follow-ups.

The full programme of the study session is attached to the report as appendix II.

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Participants presenting their work

Guest lecturers

There were two external lecturers at the study session:

Erion Krasniqi - an activist, trainer in non-formal education and peacebuilder from Kosovo, active since 2019. With a rich background in storytelling and peacebuilding, Erion is deeply committed to fostering harmony in conflict-affected regions, particularly in Kosovo. His extensive experience involves working closely with divided communities, leveraging dialogue and reconciliation to heal the wounds of war. Erion's contributions to the field are noteworthy. He excels in training youth workers, equipping them with the necessary skills to engage effectively with young individuals affected by conflict. Through his insights and strategies, Erion empowers these workers to nurture the development and well-being of youth within challenging contexts, thereby contributing significantly to the peacebuilding efforts in Kosovo and beyond.

He delivered a compelling session on storytelling in the context of reconciliation in Kosovo. He focused on the ethics of storytelling in post-conflict societies, sharing personal and professional insights. The session was highly appreciated by participants, who found it both relevant and emotionally resonant. The interactive Q&A allowed for meaningful exchanges, and participants left inspired to apply storytelling tools ethically in their own contexts.

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The power of storytelling session with Erion Krasniqi

Stefan Manevski - former educational advisor at EYCS and member of the Anti-Discrimination Department of the Council of Europe.

He presented the Council of Europe's work on combating hate speech and promoting anti-discrimination, with a focus on ECRI standards and the role of media self-regulation.

TALES OF TRANSFORMATION - YPAN Study Session 2025



The work of the Council of Europe in the field of hate speech and anti-discrimination session with Stefan Manevski

IV. Results and conclusions

The study session and the work of its participants resulted in several outcomes and conclusions:

Learning points of participants

- The participants assimilated the main concepts relating to peace, media literacy, conflict, violence.
- They were subsequently equipped with tools aimed at the real and concrete putting into practice of these such as storytelling, NVC and artistic activities.
- They therefore had the opportunity to experience the transition from the theoretical aspect to action as we can deduce from their words:

“Learning how to counter hate speech through stories that bring back the humanity factors”. Tools and techniques to use in my daily work with youth”.

- Participants acquired experience of working in intercultural groups and teamwork skills gaining:

“A better ability to listen, learn and understand intercultural communication”, “The

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importance of the act of listening”, “A mindset to look for and understand the meaning of every story because it’s the key to identify emotions and needs”.

- They learnt how to recognise and critically analyse dehumanizing narratives in media, understanding the media reality of all the other participants
- Working in groups participants had the opportunity to share personal technical skills also in relation to the preparation of the artistic festival, such as graphics and editorial and produced outcomes like installations, theatrical scenes, visuals and even a story book.

New ideas, conclusions and projects emerging from the discussions and working groups

Participants noted to have realised that when working in the peacebuilding field, there is a strong need to gain practical tools that allow them to transform conflict narratives in their everyday contexts, such as storytelling, non-violent communication (NVC), and creative expression. They highlighted the importance of addressing hate speech, gender stereotypes, and exclusion through alternative narratives rooted in empathy and dignity. Participants also acknowledged how impactful peacebuilding actions can be when developed and implemented within their local communities and expressed their commitment to continuing this work beyond the study session.

During the working groups and the session on follow-up actions, seven project groups were formed. Each group developed an idea for a local, regional, or international initiative, often combining methods of storytelling with human rights education, NVC, or intergenerational dialogue.

The YPAN team facilitated the development of these ideas and provided input on methodology, impact orientation, and potential partnerships. Notably, some initiatives were already implemented shortly after the session. For instance, a participant in Poland conducted an NVC workshop with the Centrum Wielokulturowe w Krakowie, engaging 20 young people of diverse backgrounds. Another participant in Georgia, with support from the organization YEAs, led a workshop in Zugdidi on distinguishing hate speech from freedom of speech.

Moreover, the impact of the study session extended to existing programmes. The Fairtogether facilitator training in the South Caucasus integrated new elements directly inspired by the session, including the use of narrative tools from Council of Europe handbooks and a new reflective activity on “Facilitator Archetypes.”

A collective publication, *Stories of Peace, Change, and Becoming* (see Appendices), was also born from the group work of the participants conducted during the week, which gathers personal, fictional, and metaphorical stories written during the session. The stories reflect the diverse experiences of the group and offer creative responses to the

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realities of conflict, migration, identity, and belonging. This shared learning and collective imaginational outcome will serve as an educational and inspirational resource within the YPAN network and beyond.

By learning about each other's experiences, challenges, and community contexts, participants felt inspired to act and collaborate. They expressed their willingness to stay connected, support one another, and continue co-creating peacebuilding spaces across borders.

Acquired competences

Participants strengthened a range of competences :

- Valuing human dignity and human rights – through storytelling and listening to lived experiences, participants fostered empathy and reaffirmed the importance of dignity in peace narratives.
- Openness to cultural otherness and worldviews – participants engaged across differences and challenged stereotypes through shared intercultural storytelling.
- Civic-mindedness and responsibility – developed by designing follow-up projects that respond to local needs and advocate for peaceful and inclusive societies.
- Self-efficacy and autonomy – strengthened through collaborative planning and ownership of local peacebuilding initiatives.
- Empathy and tolerance of ambiguity – practiced by engaging with complex, sensitive narratives and learning to hold multiple truths in conflict-affected contexts.
- Media literacy and critical thinking skills – acquired through analysing conflict-related narratives and learning to counter misinformation and propaganda.
- Skills of listening and observing – developed in non-violent communication sessions and storytelling exercises, enabling respectful, non-judgmental communication.
- Conflict transformation and non-violent communication skills – applied during workshops and later adapted for local follow-up actions.
- Co-operation and teamwork – strengthened during intercultural group work, planning, and implementation of shared follow-up initiatives.
- Knowledge and critical understanding of media, human rights, and social realities – gained through thematic sessions on ethical storytelling, peace education, and narrative framing.

These competences prepare participants to act as active citizens and peacebuilders, committed to democratic values, intercultural dialogue, and human rights in their communities and beyond.

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YPAN growth

As a direct outcome of the study session, five participants applied to become members of the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network (YPAN). Their engagement reflects the strong alignment between the study session's values and YPAN's mission. This intake of new applicants represents a meaningful step in expanding the Network with motivated young leaders who bring fresh energy, perspectives, and regional insights, particularly through their experience in working with youth from conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts. Several of them have shown initiative in proposing follow-up activities and collaborations, which will contribute to the sustainability of the study session's impact and further enrich the Network's work.

Cooperation and networking

The study session fostered cooperation and networking among participants, both between existing members of YPAN (there were 7 YPAN members in the study session) and young peacebuilders from diverse backgrounds. Through joint group work, personal sharing, and collaborative storytelling exercises, participants formed connections that are already translating into ideas for future cross-border initiatives.

The space created during the study session encouraged participants to exchange insights into the conflict dynamics and peacebuilding strategies in their contexts, allowing them to broaden their perspectives and deepen their understanding of intercultural approaches to peace. This experience empowered them to envision themselves as active changemakers and multipliers.

The study session also increased the visibility of the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network, especially among young peace practitioners and youth workers from conflict-affected regions. It served as a multiplication space for the values and principles of the Network, such as ethical storytelling, inclusion, and non-violence.

In addition to contributing to YPAN's outreach, the session functioned as a capacity-building opportunity for current members, who strengthened their facilitation and communication competences through active roles in the programme.

Ambassadors for the Council of Europe's values

The study session successfully introduced more young people to the Council of Europe, its core values, and its diverse youth programmes. Moreover, the programme's methodology was strongly aligned with the Council of Europe's educational principles. The content and sessions drew extensively on flagship educational resources such as Compass, T-Kit 12: Youth Transforming Conflict, The Education Pack: All Different–All Equal, Bookmarks, and We CAN!. These materials, some of which were also distributed to participants during the session, provided both theoretical grounding and practical

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tools to engage critically with topics such as human rights, peacebuilding, and anti-discrimination.

By working with these resources and actively engaging in discussions around conflict transformation and ethical communication, participants gained a deeper understanding of the Council of Europe's work in the field of youth. As a result, the study session contributed to cultivating a new group of young multipliers who are now better equipped and motivated to promote the Council of Europe's values of peace, inclusion, and human rights in their own communities and networks. Several participants already expressed interest in further engaging with the Council's mechanisms -particularly the European Youth Foundation (EYF) - and are currently considering developing follow-up projects in their local contexts with EYF support.

Suggestions or proposals for the Council of Europe

Following the study session, YPAN and the participants recommend that the Council of Europe continue to create and support meaningful spaces where young people can share their experiences of conflict, learn from one another, and co-develop international initiatives that contribute to a culture of peace.

Considering the high number of applications received and the strong engagement throughout the session, we propose the following:

- Support more initiatives focused on youth-led peacebuilding, ethical storytelling, and conflict transformation.
- Ensure sustainable funding for follow-up actions and local implementation of peace initiatives, made directly available to participants committed to implementing local peace initiatives, without requiring separate or complex funding applications.
- Enhance accessibility through fee waivers and additional logistical support for participants in need, particularly those from underrepresented and conflict-affected regions such as Azerbaijan and Georgia. Furthermore, provide legal and institutional support beyond the study session for participants who may face risks or prosecution in their home countries due to their engagement in peacebuilding activities
- Leverage study sessions as platforms to review and develop youth-informed recommendations for the Committee of Ministers and support their broader dissemination.

By recognising the full potential of study sessions as both educational and policy-shaping tools, the Council of Europe can further strengthen the role of young people in shaping democratic, peaceful, and inclusive societies across Europe.

V. Follow-up and evaluation

One of the objectives was to establish cooperation between young peacebuilders in

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Europe and beyond and encourage them to plan common activities promoting a culture of peace.

Follow-up Activities Planned or Implemented

During the project, seven follow-up project groups were formed. In addition, many participants expressed a strong interest in implementing peace advocacy initiatives and conducting peace education workshops tailored to the specific needs and contexts of their local communities.

To support this, two dedicated sessions were held to plan follow-up actions. Participants organized themselves into groups based on shared interests and began developing concrete ideas for local initiatives. The planned actions included:

1. Collaboration with Schools and NGOs: A hybrid training program in collaboration with a local NGO in Krakow, focusing on peace education in school settings.
2. Interactive Workshops: Sessions on nonviolent communication, storytelling, and human rights, featuring guest speakers to enhance learning and dialogue.
3. Language Exchange Initiative: Language training for both locals and immigrants, designed to promote cultural exchange and mutual storytelling. The initiative will be supported by online dissemination of stories and outcomes.
4. Peace Education in Rural Azerbaijan: Workshops conducted in high schools in rural areas of Azerbaijan, centred around NVC and storytelling to promote empathy and understanding.
5. Cross-Border Storytelling Workshops: A coordinated series of workshops across Armenia, Lithuania, Georgia, and Germany, targeting youth aged 16–30. Each country will host a one-day session with the same structure and content, focusing on team building, shared and alternative narratives, and combating hate speech using the fishbowl method for dialogue. The initiative aims to build peaceful and inclusive communities through parallel local action and cross-group reflection.
6. Online NVC Training for Youth Workers: A two-hour online workshop involving at least 20 participants from four or more countries. Led by three trainers, the session will provide youth workers (ages 18–25) with practical tools in NVC, incorporating presentations, group activities, and reflection.
7. Podcast Series on Migration and Community Life: An English-language podcast sharing real-life stories from diverse social communities. Episodes will highlight both challenges and resilience, aiming to counter idealized or biased migration narratives and offer a grounded perspective on lived experiences.
8. Digital Campaign for Youth: An inclusive online movement focused on storytelling,

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human rights, and counter-narratives. Young people will share short videos (1–1.5 minutes) telling their stories, contributing to a growing platform for peacebuilding and youth-led narratives.

9. **Workshops on Gender Stereotypes:** A two-session workshop series for university students addressing gender stereotypes through storytelling. Activities will include creative writing, such as fairytales and bedtime stories, to identify and rewrite gender-biased narratives.
10. **Artivism Through Fashion:** Workshops combining artistic expression and activism (“artivism”) on themes such as feminism, social justice, and peace. Participants will design and create clothing items bearing their messages, blending fashion with social engagement.

All the initiatives were defined and proposed by groups of participants and the YPAN team gave support by facilitating the process and giving feedback on the contents, methodologies and possible synergies and allies.

After really short time we were glad to hear that some local actions were implemented so far:

- One of our participants from Poland organized a **Non-violent communication (NVC)** workshop in collaboration with Centrum Wielokulturowe w Krakowie. 20 participants with different backgrounds and nationalities were engaged in discussions and activities to understand the importance of positive communication, facilitated by our participant who was drawing from the learnings of the Study Session.

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- **Fairtogether: Build ConnAction for Peace** - a training for facilitators.

This year's *fairtogether: Build ConnAction for Peace* was a follow-up to the study session implemented by Act for Transformation - South Caucasus Office, in partnership with NGOs from Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. One of the participants of the study session took on a dual role as both project coordinator on the Armenian side and facilitator. Drawing inspiration from *Tales of Transformation* and new methods introduced during the study session, several innovative elements were integrated into the training. These included:

- A new module on Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Alternative Narratives, using resources from the Council of Europe to explore how stories shape perceptions and realities.
- Storytelling exercises linked to the “Transforming Power” Mandala pillars, making abstract concepts more relatable and impactful.
- A newly developed activity, *Facilitator Archetypes*, encouraging participants to reflect on their facilitation styles and areas for growth.

These additions deepened the participants' engagement and enhanced the overall learning experience. While the project remains low-profile due to regional sensitivities, it continues to foster cross-border dialogue and peacebuilding in meaningful ways.

Pictures from the local action can be found [here](#).

- **Recognise & Combat Hate Speech Locally** – a workshop for youth in Zugdidi, Georgia

As a follow-up to the study session one of the participants organized a local workshop in the Zugdidi region of Georgia, titled “*Recognise & Combat Hate Speech Locally*.” The workshop targeted high school students aged 14–18 and aimed to raise awareness about hate speech and its distinction from freedom of speech.

Over the course of 3.5 to 4 hours, the session combined theoretical and practical components. Participants explored the root causes of harmful narratives within their local context and engaged in discussions to develop constructive solutions. The event also served to promote awareness of EU–Council of Europe cooperation and was designed as a direct continuation of the learning and methodology introduced during the initial training.

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Follow Up Action - Recognise & Combat Hate Speech Locally



Follow Up Action - Recognise & Combat Hate Speech Locally

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- **Nonviolent Communication in Practice** – an international online workshop for youth workers

An online workshop has been scheduled for mid-August, targeting youth workers, trainers, and individuals interested in Nonviolent Communication (NVC). The session is expected to bring together approximately 20 participants from around six different countries. The aim is to introduce the fundamentals of NVC, explore its application in addressing discrimination and verbal aggression, and encourage participants to reflect on how they can integrate these tools into their professional and personal lives.

The 2-hour session will include an icebreaker, collaborative brainstorming, a short theoretical input, group exercises, participant presentations, and a closing reflection. Participants will be invited to share their expectations, their understanding of NVC, and potential ways to apply their insights moving forward. Promotional materials, the session outline, and additional resources are currently being finalized, with flexible planning in place to adapt to different group sizes.

Mentoring Project Groups

To support the sustainability and impact of the projects envisioned during the study session, YPAN has initiated a light mentorship process for the project groups. The facilitators and YPAN members are committed to providing:

- Advice on funding opportunities, including Erasmus+ and the European Youth Foundation,
- Feedback on concept development and educational design,
- Connection with experienced YPAN members, who can serve as regional or thematic mentors,
- Peer review spaces, allowing participants to share progress and challenges across projects.

This mentorship has already begun informally through the WhatsApp group and direct support to participants preparing grant applications and running initial workshops. The first successful local actions — such as the NVC workshop in Kraków and the integration of storytelling tools in the South Caucasus — serve as models of how such mentoring helps realize ideas sparked during the session.

Support in applying for new projects

The participants were supported by the YPAN members in preparation for the application forms for the project ideas developed during the study session. As some of the participants applied to be members of the YPAN Network, thus developing further cooperation, the scope of the network and its activities were also open to them.

The WhatsApp group with other participants is still active, and we have shared some opportunities and resources that might be useful for the participants.

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And a clear example of this support is that one of the participants came to another project of YPAN a few days after our study session.

Further Educational Spaces

Recognizing the transformative potential of this initiative, YPAN is exploring ways to expand educational opportunities beyond the study session. These may include:

- Creating a digital learning hub, hosting tools, stories, and ethical guidelines developed during the session,
- Facilitating online workshops or webinars, led by participants or guest educators, to deepen understanding of trauma-informed storytelling, digital advocacy, and peace narratives,
- Developing a peer-led micro-learning series, where small modules on topics like “Countering Dehumanizing Narratives” or “Facilitating Inclusive Dialogue” can be delivered across YPAN channels,
- Planning regional StoryLabs or follow-up residencies, where selected participants can continue co-creating content and strategies for local peace actions.

The need for continued educational space was clearly identified by participants, especially those working in regions with limited access to peace education or safe platforms for youth expression. This follow-up commitment aligns with YPAN’s long-term goals of fostering active citizenship and ethical youth leadership and builds directly on the momentum of this transformative study session.

The Study Session in Media: Study Session’s Visibility and Outreach

The study session was promoted primarily through the Youth Peace Ambassadors Network’s and the co-operating organization’s social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. The [call for participants in YPAN, PA Poland](#) and [planIMPACT](#) reached over 15,000 users and was shared nearly 37 times on social media.

During the study session, visibility was further amplified through active content sharing by participants and facilitators, together with the support from the CoE intern Inga Kurtanidze, with content including photos, quotes, and short reflections on the sessions. Almost every day, a summary video ([Day 1](#), [Day 2](#), [Day 3](#), [Day 4](#), [Day 5](#)) was created and posted to YPAN’s Instagram and Facebook pages, highlighting key moments, reflections, and activities. These videos served to document the learning journey while reaching a wider audience beyond the participants themselves with over 7300 views.

We also documented the experience through curated Instagram Stories, which were published on the official YPAN Instagram page. These posts highlighted key activities,

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showcased intercultural learning, and celebrated diversity and collaboration among youth from conflict-affected regions. A compilation of these Instagram stories can be found [here](#).

Common hashtags used to increase visibility included:

#TalesOfTransformation, #YPAN, #CoEYouth, #ypanetwork, #YouthVoices, #NonViolentCommunication, #Ethical Online.

The study session was also featured on the official Instagram page of the Council of Europe Youth Department, further boosting its visibility. The post can be accessed here:

[🔗 Peace through storytelling – Instagram post by COE Youth](#)

Another outreach initiative was the video developed by the participants titled “Why Non-Violent Communication Matters?” In this video, participants asked the question to each other questions about the relevance of non-violent communication in their lives and communities and why it matters. The video was shared on [YPAN's](#) and [planIMPACT's](#) Instagram and has, by now, reached over 3,800 views.

In addition to real-time visibility, the outcomes of the study session were further shared through a dedicated section on the [YPAN website](#), which hosts the outputs of the online storytelling festival. This digital exhibition features the creative and narrative-based work developed by participants during the week, which allows the impact of the session to continue well beyond the residential phase and enables a broader audience to engage with the participants' voices. Participants have created the [Study Session picture book](#) as well as [The Sharp Edge of the Ordinary - Stories of Peace, Change and Becoming booklet](#).

Finally, after the project, further social media posts were made in both the YPAN's social media accounts as well as the partner organizations, such as [Dexiant Emperanta](#), as well as by the trainers and the participants.

Overall evaluation

From the organisers' point of view, the study session was a highly successful and inspiring experience that fully aligned with the aims and objectives set out during the planning phase. The program was thoughtfully designed around key themes—human rights education, media literacy, storytelling, and non-violent communication—and implemented using non-formal education methods in line with the Council of Europe's values.

One of the most encouraging outcomes was the extraordinary level of commitment and engagement shown by the participants. Their motivation, openness, and deep involvement in the process exceeded our expectations. Many demonstrated not only strong participation throughout the week but also took initiative in shaping meaningful follow-up actions, reflecting a real sense of ownership and responsibility for applying what they learned in their local contexts.

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With this in mind, the following evaluation results provide a deeper insight into the participants' experiences and the overall impact of the study session:

Based on the results from the evaluation form the 84.6 % of participants described their experience as “very positive,” highlighting strong achievements across all the key objectives, including human rights education, media literacy, storytelling, and non-violent communication (NVC). A key conclusion was that by connecting personal experiences to broader social realities, young people can shift dominant discourses and foster empathy, healing, and transformation within their communities.

The majority felt empowered, inspired, and better equipped to address dehumanizing narratives in conflict-affected communities. They particularly appreciated the intercultural learning environment, the creativity fostered through artistic methods, and the safe, inclusive atmosphere created by the training team. Some participants noted areas for improvement, such as a desire for more time for creative work, deeper exploration of theoretical writing structures, or greater use of personal storytelling. Overall, the project successfully met its goals and had a deep and lasting impact on participants both personally and professionally.

The criteria for the study session were fully achieved and present during the implementation of this study session. The aims and objectives were clear from the very beginning and according to the evaluation of the participants, they were met at the end of the Study Session. The whole study session program was organised by using the non-formal education principles and approaches, and it included the values and methodologies proposed by the Council of Europe.

The methodology used to deliver the sessions was appreciated by 73.1% of participants. The session was fully supported by the staff at the EYCS, and participants had the optimal working conditions.

Ultimately, the session catalysed a community of youth peacebuilders committed to transforming their local realities. The diversity of follow-up actions reflects the creativity and urgency with which young people are engaging in peace work, locally, regionally, and internationally.

VI. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Daily Programme

Appendix 2 - Visual Outcomes

Appendix 3: Story Book: The Sharp Edge of the Ordinary Stories of Peace, Change, and Becoming
- WRITTEN BY YPAN STORYTELLERS

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Appendix 1: Full program of the Study Session

DFD-YD/ETD (2025) 91 rev

Strasbourg, 9 May 2025

Study Session

“TALES OF TRANSFORMATION: EMPOWERING YOUTH LEADERS THROUGH ETHICAL STORYTELLING”

Study session organised within the [Youth for Democracy programme](#)
in cooperation with the *Youth Peace Ambassadors Network and Peace Ambassadors
Poland* <https://ypa.network/>

European Youth Centre, Strasbourg

19-24 May 2025

Daily Programme

TALES OF TRANSFORMATION - YPAN Study Session 2025

18 May 2025, Sunday

Arrival of participants

19:00 *Dinner*

21:00 *Welcome evening*

19 May 2025, Monday

08:00 – 09:15 *Registrations at lobby area of the European Youth Centre*

09:30 *Opening with Introduction to Study Session with Stefano DOMINIONI, executive director of the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg*
Intro of aims & objectives of the Study Session / Expectations & programme

11:00 *Break*

11:30 *Team Building activity: to get to know each other*

13:00 *Lunch*

14:30 *Defining “Foundations of Peace”:*
to build a common understanding of the key concepts related to the study session:
peace, peacebuilding, human rights, conflict and conflict transformation

16:00 *Break*

16:30 *Foundations of Human Rights: Human Rights in a Nutshell:*
to introduce the essential principles of human rights and explore their relevance to
youth in conflict-affected contexts

18:00 *Reflection groups*

19:00 *Dinner*

21:00 *Evening Activity*

20 May 2025, Tuesday

09:30 *Mapping dehumanizing narratives:*
to discuss and understand realities of young people from conflicted affected
communities specifically focusing on mapping and analysing dehumanizing
narratives about war and conflict

11:00 *Break*

11:30 *A well biased Media diet: Media Literacy:*
to understand what media literacy is and to investigate different types of bias using

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examples from their own lives and the media

13:00 *Lunch break*

14:30 *Know your narratives:*

to understand how stories and narratives can reinforce stereotypes and to learn how to look at them more carefully to avoid biases and prevent harm

16:00 *Break*

16:30 *Through your eyes: to understand different narratives, avoid bias*

18:00 *Reflection groups*

19:00 *Dinner*

21:00 *Evening Activity*

21 May 2025, Wednesday

09:30 *Non-violent communication:*

to introduce participants to the components and principles of Non-Violent Communication and its four elements

11:00 *Break*

11:30 *Media literacy-ethical communication online:*

to raise awareness about responsible digital behaviour and foster critical thinking around online communication. Together with the participants, we will co-create a set of ethical communication guidelines that reflect shared values and principles

13:00 *Lunch break*

14:30 *The work of the Council of Europe in the field of hate speech and*

anti-discrimination with Stefan MANEVSKI, senior project officer, Anti-discrimination Department

16:00 *Break*

16:30 *Postcard of the day:*

to reconnect in a funny way to what we have lived and 'tell a story' by our bodies

18:00 *Reflection groups*

19:00 *Dinner*

21:00 *Evening Activity*

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22 May 2025, Thursday

09:30 *The Power of Storytelling: with guest lecturer Erion Krasniqi (Local Peace): to understand the power of stories and applying them in the context of war and peace education as a motivational/inspirational tool with the example of work in Kosovo²*

11:00 *Break*

11:30 *Storytelling techniques: to gain a powerful tool for recognition and use of Jung archetype.*

13:00 *Lunch*

14:30 *Storytelling Practice: to put in practice different storytelling and creative writing techniques*

16:00 *Break*

16:30 *Good night story: to create a peace night story through collaborative storytelling practice*

18:00 *Reflection groups*

19:00 *Dinner*

21:00 *Evening Activity*

23 May 2025, Friday

09:30 *Follow-up Ideas Preparation: to support participants in reflecting on their learning journey and transforming it into concrete, actionable ideas for future initiatives*

11:00 *Break*

11:30 *Working on the Online Festival: to finalise working on the storytelling or artistic outputs to be shared with a broader audience through YPAN and the Council of Europe's Youth Department's channels*

13:00 *Lunch*

14:00 *Visit to the Palace of Europe – Council of Europe Headquarters*

16:00 *Free Afternoon in the city*

² All references to Kosovo, whether the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

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19:00 *Dinner out in the city*

24 May 2025, Saturday

09:30 *Follow up Presentation:*

to provide a space for participants to present their developed ideas, projects, or creative outputs, receive constructive feedback, and refine their work for potential implementation

11:00 *Break*

11:30 *Reflection on the Learnings:*

to consolidate and synthesize the key insights and knowledge gained throughout the study session, and to reflect on their relevance for participants' future work

13:00 *Lunch*

14:30 *Evaluation and Farewell:*

to evaluate the study session, share final impressions, celebrate achievements, and conclude the learning journey

19:00 *Dinner*

21:00 *Goodbye Party*

25 May 2025, Sunday

Departure of participants



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Appendix 2 :Visual outcomes



Exposition
Storytelling through arts

Through your eyes
(photo project)

Are you really looking?
(murales)

A Postcard for peace
(visual composition)



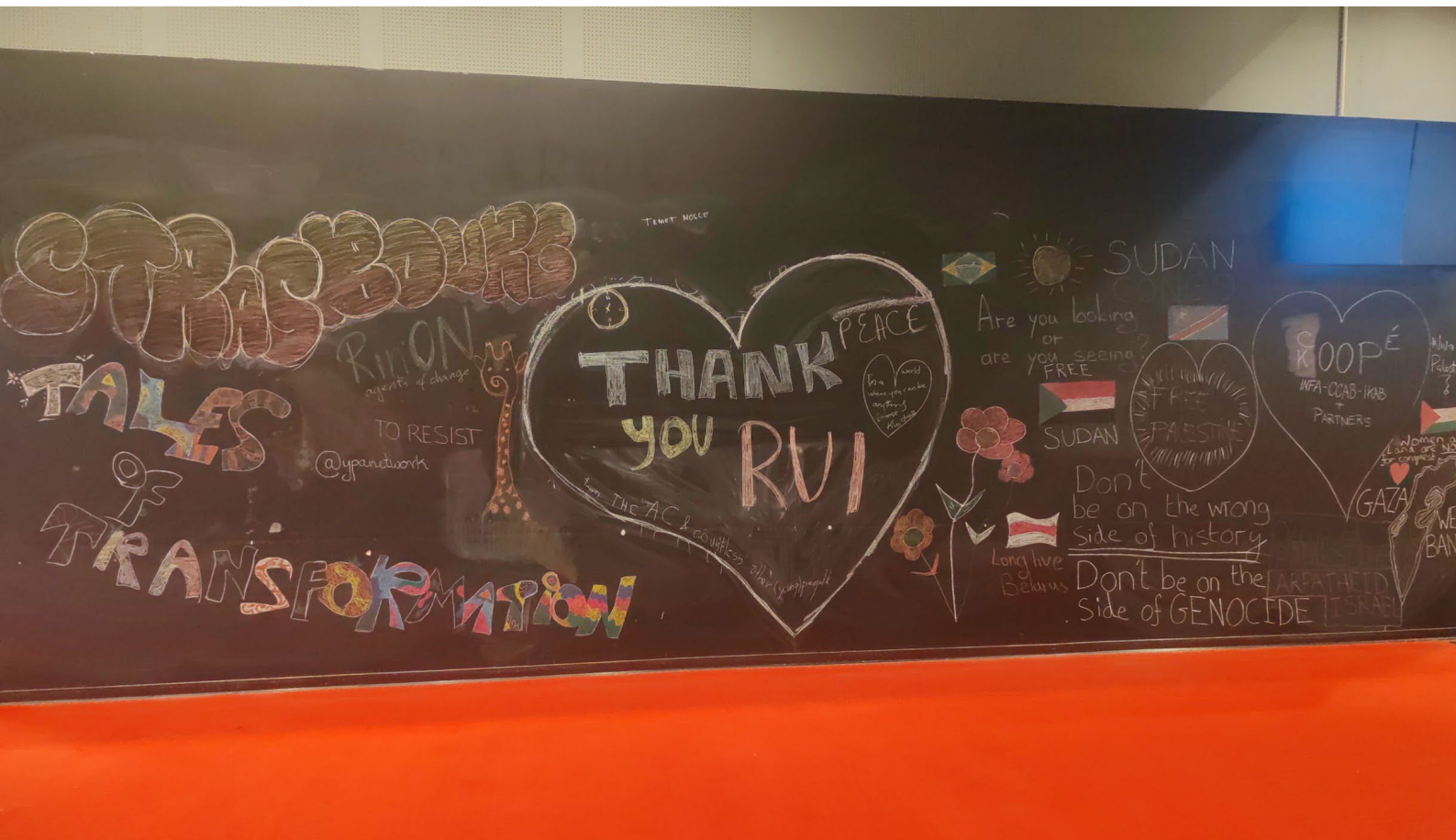
TALES OF TRANSFORMATION - YPAN Study Session 2025

1-A Postcard for peace:



TALES OF TRANSFORMATION - YPAN Study Session 2025

3-Are you really looking?



Appendix 3: Story Book

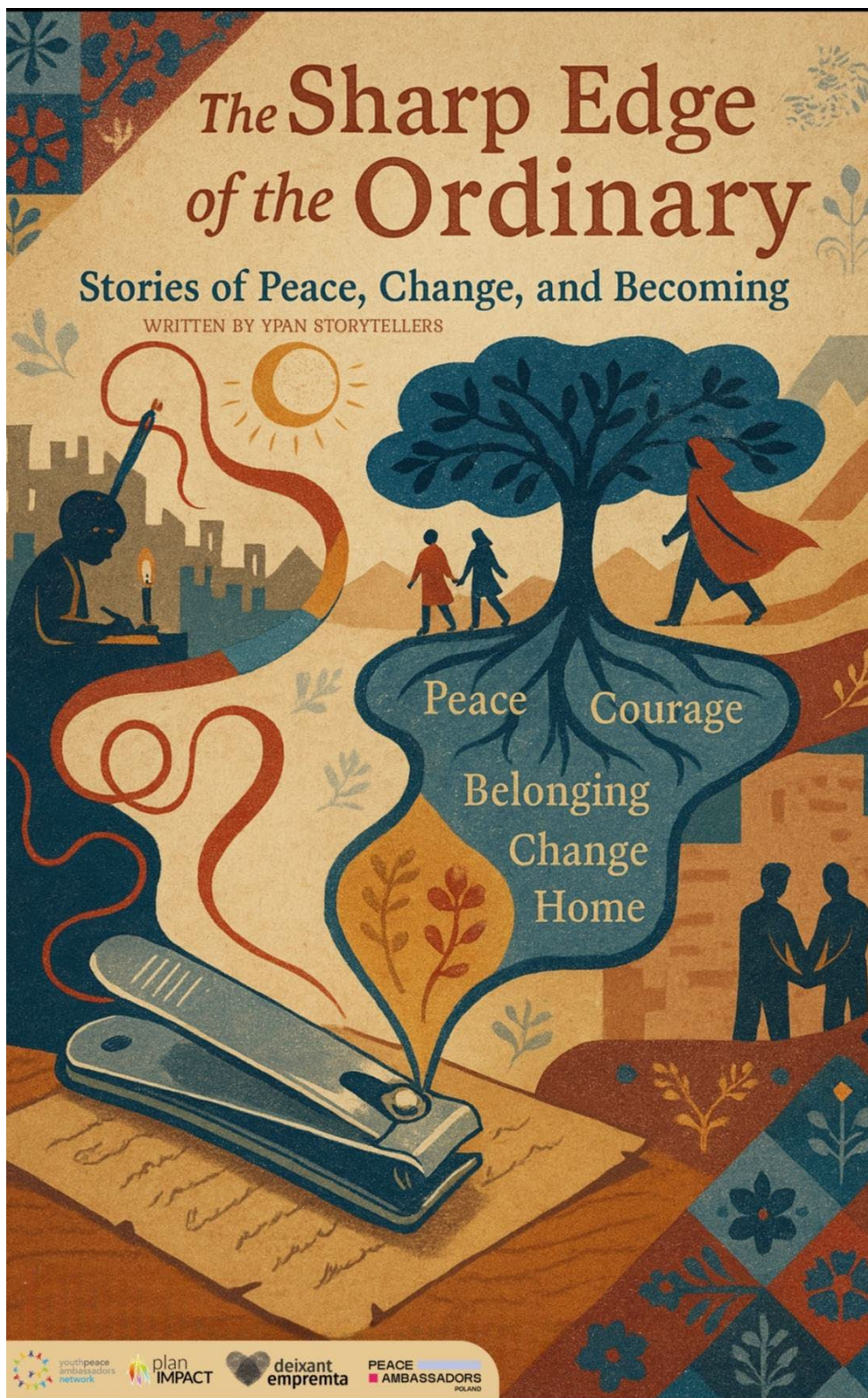
The Sharp Edge of the Ordinary Stories of Peace, Change, and Becoming - WRITTEN BY
YPAN STORYTELLERS



youthpeace
ambassadors
network



TALES OF TRANSFORMATION - YPAN Study Session 2025



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5. <u>THE ROAD TO PAQE</u>	7
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HOW THESE STORIES WERE BORN?

THIS BOOK WAS CREATED BY THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE YPAN STUDY SESSION – TALES OF THANSFORMATION, WHICH TOOK PLACE AT EUROPEAN YOUTH CENTER IN STRASBOURG (FRANCE) DURING 18-25 MAY 2025.

IT GATHERED 31 STORYTELLERS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD WHO WERE CONNECTED THROUGH THEIR DIFFERENT NARATIVES AND WILLINGNESS TO SHARE THEM TO EACH OTHER.

EVERY STORY OF THIS BOOK REFLECTS A GROUP WORK, WHICH WAS COMPLETED DURING DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES OF THE STUDY SESSION.

A FULL LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS CAN BE FOUND AT THE END OF THE BOOK.

TALES OF TRANSFORMATION - YPAN Study Session 2025

***WHEN THE WAR STARTED, BUT YOUR
NAILS ARE STILL NOT DONE***

SHE'S IN A HURRY, WORRYING

LOOKING FOR HER SUITCASE

HOMELESS... GLASSES... CHILDREN...

TOMORROWS BELONG TO CONFUSION

ALARM IS RINGING LIKE NOISE OF CHANGE

HOME IS MISSING IN THE MORNING

THE PAINT HAS NOT DRIED YET, SHIT!

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BOB'S STORY

THIS IS THE STORY BEHIND THIS NAIL CUTTER. THIS ISN'T AN ORDINARY NAIL CUTTER. THAT'S BOB, AND BOB HAS A STORY.

BOB IS MADE FROM STAINLESS STEEL, AND FOR ME TO DO BOB AND EVERYONE ELSE INVOLVED IN THIS STORY JUSTICE, I MUST START FROM THE BEGINNING. THE VERY BEGINNING. SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE IN BIG BANG, SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE IN GOD OR SEVERAL GODS. BOB, HOWEVER, BELIEVES THAT THE WORLD STARTED WHEN BOB WAS CREATED. WELL I MEAN IT IS BOB'S STORY ALL – ISN'T IT?

SO BOB'S STORY STARTS WITH THE METAL THAT WAS REQUIRED TO MAKE THEM.

BEHIND BOB IS WRITTEN MADE IN CHINA, BUT WHERE DOES BOB REALLY COMES FROM, THE ORIGIN OF BOB COMES FROM PRECIOUS METAL THAT CAN ONLY BE FOUND IN DR CONGO AND THE EXTRACTION OF THIS METAL USES CHILD LABOUR AND EXPLOITATION PAYING THEM 1 POUND PER DAY AND, THESE ARE TAKEN TO THE BIG FACTORIES IN CHINA TO PRODUCE THIS NAIL CUTTER THAT YOU SEE TODAY, AND TODAY THIS COSTS 200 POUNDS.

THE NAIL CUTTER

THIS IS A SMALL, OLD NAIL CUTTER. IT BELONGED TO MY GRANDFATHER, WHO WAS A SOLDIER DURING WORLD WAR II.

HE GOT IT ON CHRISTMAS EVE IN 1943, DURING A SHORT CEASEFIRE. THE GERMAN AND FRENCH SOLDIERS STOPPED FIGHTING, CAME OUT OF THEIR TRENCHES, AND CELEBRATED CHRISTMAS TOGETHER. THEY SHARED SONGS, FOOD, AND EVEN SMALL GIFTS. A FRENCH SOLDIER GAVE THIS NAIL CUTTER TO MY GRANDFATHER.

THE NEXT DAY, THE FIGHTING STARTED AGAIN.
MY GRANDFATHER DIED IN THAT BATTLE.

THIS NAIL CUTTER IS THE ONLY THING LEFT FROM HIM. I NEVER MET HIM, BUT THROUGH THIS SIMPLE OBJECT, I FEEL CONNECTED TO HIM – AND TO A MOMENT WHEN, EVEN IN WAR, PEOPLE CHOSE PEACE.

THE ROAD TO PAQE

IN THE ORDINARY VILLAGE OF LUFTË LIVED NORI GRANITEYO. LUFTË WAS A PLACE OF GIGANTIC MOUNTAINS AND SPARKLING WATERFALLS BUT ALSO OF CONSTANT FIGHTS BETWEEN THE 2 TRIBES LIVING IN THE EAST AND THE WEST.

GRANITEYO WAS MISERABLE IN LUFTË. THEY HATED THE FIGHTS, THE FIRES AND THE FEAR. THERE WAS ONE POSITIVE SIDE OF LUFTË HOWEVER; IN THE FOREST TO THE SOUTH LIVED A WISE WITCH CALLED BOSZORKA. GRANITEYO DECIDED TO VISIT HER AND ASK FOR ADVICE ON HOW THEY COULD BECOME HAPPIER. THE WITCH LOOKED INTO HER CAULDRON AND SAID IN HER RASPY VOICE:

"TO FIND HAPPINESS YOU HAVE TO FIND PAQE!"

PAQE SOUNDED LIKE A WONDERFUL PLACE. GRANITEYO RAN BACK TO THE VILLAGE AND TOLD EVERYONE WHO WOULD LISTEN - THEY JUST HAVE TO LEAVE LUFTË BEHIND AND GO TO PAQE.

"YOU MUST LEARN HOW THE WORLD WORKS IF YOU HOPE TO CHANGE IT," SHE SAID.

AND SO, GRANITEYO SET OFF AN ADVENTURE ACROSS MOUNTAINS, RIVERS, AND DESERTS, ARRIVING AT VILLAGE AFTER VILLAGE, CITY AFTER CITY. AT FIRST, THESE PLACES SEEMED LIKE THE FABLED PAQE - PEACEFUL, COLORFUL, VIBRANT. BUT THE REALITY SOON HIT.

IN ONE PLACE, WOMEN WERE SILENCED AND SHAMED. IN ANOTHER, THE POOR STARVED WHILE THE ELITE THREW GOLDEN FEASTS. ELSEWHERE, PEOPLE WERE JUDGED FOR THE COLOR OF THEIR SKIN, WHOM THEY LOVED, OR THE LANGUAGES THEY SPOKE.

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EVERY TIME, GRANITEYO WOULD LEAVE, DISHEARTENED. BUT IN EVERY PLACE, SOMEONE JOINED THEM—OTHERS WHO ALSO BELIEVED IN SOMETHING BETTER. THERE WAS JIN, A REBELLIOUS POET; NERA, A HEALER WHO HAD BEEN EXILED; SAJID, A QUIET ARTIST WITH FIRE IN HIS EYES. ONE BY ONE, THEY JOINED GRANITEYO, AND THEY CALLED THEMSELVES NAPI-NOMADS OF ACTION, PEACE, AND INCLUSION.

NAPI CONTINUED WANDERING, STILL LOOKING FOR PAQE. BUT THEY NEVER SEEMED TO FIND IT. AFTER MANY YEARS OF SEARCHING AND FIGHTING, GRANITEYO SUDDENLY FOUND THEMSELVES ONCE AGAIN IN THE OUTSKIRTS OF LUFTË – SAME BUILDINGS, SAME SMELL OF SMOKE, SAME HOSTILITY. NOTHING HAD CHANGED.

GRANITEYO SANK TO THEIR KNEES. “IT WAS ALL FOR NOTHING,” THEY WHISPERED. BUT JUST THEN, BOSZORKA APPEARED ONCE MORE, HER CLOAK RED AS EVER, HER VOICE STILL AS RASPY AS IT WAS ON THAT FATEFUL NIGHT MANY YEARS AGO. “YOU STILL DON’T SEE?” SHE ASKED GENTLY. “YOU HAVE FOUND PAQE A LONG TIME AGO. IT WAS NEVER A PLACE ON A MAP. EVERY TIME YOU STOOD UP AGAINST INJUSTICE, EVERY TIME YOU BUILT TRUST WITH SOMEONE NEW, EVERY TIME NAPI ACTED WITH LOVE—YOU WERE BUILDING PAQE. YOU WERE CREATING PEACE.”

GRANITEYO BURST OUT LAUGHING WITH TEARS IN THEIR EYES. HOW COULD HAVE THEY MISSED IT? THEY HAVE FOUND THEIR HOME THE MOMENT OTHERS HAVE JOINED THEM, THE MOMENT THEY FIRST LAUGHED TOGETHER OR SHARED A MEAL. THEY HAVE ARRIVED HOME IN EVERY LATE NIGHT CONVERSATION, IN EVERY HUG AND IN EVERY LIFE CHANGED.

THEY WERE PAQE AND PAQE WAS THEM. SIMPLE AS THAT.

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NAMES THEY NEVER LEARNED

KRAKOW, 9:30 AM

ALI WALKS PAST THE NEIGHBORS' HOUSES ON HIS WAY TO SCHOOL. HE NOTICES PARENTS PULLING THEIR CHILDREN INSIDE.

"TERRORIST" – IT'S THE ONLY WORD HE HEARS.

CAIRO, 2:00 PM

AHMED CHANGES HIS CLOTHES FOR HIS COUSIN'S WEDDING. HE FEELS UNCOMFORTABLE, LOST IN A VERSION OF HIMSELF THAT ISN'T REAL.

TO SURVIVE, HE ERASES HIMSELF – PIECE BY PIECE – JUST TO BE ACCEPTED.

TEXAS, 8:00 PM

NORA OPENS HER LAPTOP, HOPEFUL FOR A RESPONSE FROM HER DREAM COMPANY.

ANOTHER EMAIL. ANOTHER REJECTION.

THIS TIME, IT READS: "WE DO NOT ACCEPT APPLICANTS OF COLOR."

UNTIL WE CONFRONT IT, HATE WILL KEEP REWRITING STORIES THAT WERE MEANT TO INSPIRE.

THREADS OF RESILIENCE

MOTHER WHO LIVES TO GROW UP HER CHILDREN ALONE

AFTER THE CONFLICT, NIA LOST HER HUSBAND AND WAS LEFT TO CARE FOR THEIR TWO CHILDREN BY HERSELF. THE CITY WAS BROKEN – HOMES WERE RUINED, JOBS WERE GONE, AND HOPE WAS HARD TO FIND. BUT NIA KNEW SHE HAD TO KEEP GOING.

SHE STARTED A SMALL SEWING BUSINESS FROM HOME. DURING THE DAY, SHE LOOKED AFTER HER CHILDREN. THE FAMILY LIVED IN A SMALL APARTMENT, SO NIA WORKED IN THE SAME ROOM HER CHILDREN WERE SLEEPING. AT NIGHT, SHE WORKED BY A WEAK LIGHT SO AS NOT TO WAKE THE CHILDREN, USING OLD CLOTH. SHE WAS OFTEN SO TIRED, BUT SHE DIDN'T STOP.

ONE NIGHT, HALF-ASLEEP, SHE MEANT TO SEW FABRIC BUT ENDED UP POKING HER OWN FINGER. BLOOD STAINED THE CLOTH, BUT SHE WIPED IT OFF AND KEPT SEWING. SHE COULDN'T AFFORD TO STOP.

LITTLE BY LITTLE, PEOPLE NOTICED HER WORK. HER CLOTHES WEREN'T JUST BEAUTIFUL – THEY TOLD A STORY OF STRENGTH. NIA WAS MORE THAN A MOTHER OR A WIDOW. SHE BECAME A SYMBOL OF HOW PEOPLE CAN RISE, EVEN FROM RUINS.

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THE EDUCATOR WHO RETURNED

SALMA RAN AWAY FROM THE WAR AS A TEENAGER, FINDING REFUGE AND EDUCATION IN A EUROPEAN COUNTRY. YEARS LATER, WHEN THE FIGHTING STOPPED, SHE CAME BACK – NOT AS A SURVIVOR, BUT AS A TEACHER. THE VILLAGE HARDLY RECOGNIZED HER. SOME DIDN'T BELIEVE SHE HAD REALLY STUDIED. OTHERS WERE LAUGHING AT THE IDEA OF EDUCATING GIRLS.

STILL, SALMA STARTED TEACHING UNDER A TREE. ONE GIRL JOINED, THEN TWO. EVENTUALLY, THE COMMUNITY BEGAN TO LISTEN, THEN LEARN. SALMA DIDN'T JUST TEACH LETTERS – SHE TAUGHT BELIEF.

HER CLASSROOM BECAME A SYMBOL OF REBIRTH.

AMZEL AND VAHAB

THIS PLACE WAS ALWAYS RESPECTING TRADITIONS. ALWAYS FAITHFUL TO ITS ROOTS. ALWAYS CONSERVATIVE. TOO CONSERVATIVE FOR PEOPLE LIKE AMZEL AND VAHAB. SO CONSERVATIVE THAT THEY HAD TO LIE EVEN TO THEIR FAMILIES. TO THEIR CLOSEST FRIENDS. AND OH – HOW DIFFICULT IT WAS. STOLEN KISSES IN THE BACK STREETS. HUGS AND PROMISES TO EACH OTHER WHEN NOBODY'S AROUND. TEXT MESSAGES SENT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, COVERED IN CODES AND LONGING. REPETITIVE ANSWERS FROM SNEAKY UNCLES AND AUNTIES BOMBING EACH OF THEM “WHEN ARE YOU GETTING MARRIED, MY DEAR? IS NOT THERE ANY GIRL YOU MIGHT LIKE IN THE WHOLE TOWN?” OHH... IF ONLY THEY KNEW. IF ONLY THEY COULD UNDERSTAND...

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TIMES SEEMED TO GET BETTER AFTER THE WAR. THE LIBERAL VALUES SEEMED TO BECOME STRONGER, THE TRADITIONS WERE NOT PLAYING A STRONG ROLE ANY MORE, AND – FINALLY – THE PUNISHING LAW OF LOVING DIFFERENTLY WAS BEING CANCELLED.

IT GAVE A BLURRY PROMISE TO AMZEL AND VAHAB, THAT ONE DAY, ONE BEAUTIFUL SUNNY DAY THEY DO NOT HAVE TO HIDE ANYMORE. THAT THEIR LOVE, NOW WRAPPED IN SECRETS, CAN BE MET IN THE WORLD WITHOUT PREJUDICE AND JUDGMENT.

„WHEN WILL WE BE FINALLY FREE? WE HAVE BEEN STRONG FOR SO LONG... AND HOW MUCH LONGER DOES IT TAKE?“ – VAHAB WHISPERED TO AMZEL ONE OF THOSE EVENINGS, WHEN THE SUNSET PAINTED THE WHOLE TOWN IN ITS BLOODY RED. AMZEL DID NOT ANSWER. NOT BECAUSE HIS HEART WAS NOT CRAVING THE SAME – IT DID – BUT BECAUSE HE DID NOT KNOW THE ANSWER. HE JUST GENTLY SQUEEZED VAHAB'S HAND WITH A TINY PROMISE. PROMISE THAT THIS SOCIETY, WHICH SUFFERED SO MUCH IN THESE YEARS, IS CHANGING; SLOWLY BUT STILL TRANSFORMING INTO SOMETHING THAT CAN HOLD THE DIVERSITY WITH A WARM EMBRACE INSTEAD OF DISMISSING. WHERE AMZEL AND VAHAB DO NOT HAVE TO BE TOO STRONG ANYMORE. WHERE THEY CAN JUST BE. WHERE THEY CAN JUST LOVE AND BE LOVED.

THESE ARE THREE DIFFERENT STORIES. THREE STORIES OF RESILIENCE SHOWING THAT PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS CAN FACE CHALLENGES WITH COURAGE AND STRENGTH. EVEN WHEN THEY FEEL ALONE, THEY ARE NOT. WITHOUT KNOWING EACH OTHER, THEIR ACTIONS HELP REBUILD A STRONGER COMMUNITY – ONE STEP AT A TIME.

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BRIDGES OF STONE, WALLS OF SAND

IN THIS LETTER SHE READS: LONG AGO, THE CANDLE MAKERS SON, A BOY NAMED LIOR WANTED TO HELP OTHERS. HE WANTED TO BECOME A KNIGHT BUT NOT FOR THE SAKE OF POWER, HE JUST WANTED TO SERVE HIS COMMUNITY BETTER. HE WASN'T RICH OR POWERFUL, BUT HE WAS KIND. SO HE SPEND HIS YEARS PROTECTING PEOPLE, LISTENING TO THEM, AND HELPING THE COMMUNITY EVERY DAY. THROUGH HIS KINDNESS HE BECAME WELL KNOWN AND RESPECTED IN HIS COMMUNITY "YOU DON'T NEED A CROWN TO BE A LEADER," HE SAID. ELIRA READING THIS FROWNEED, A PEASANT? TEACHING HER? BUT AS SHE TURNED THE PAGE HER EYES MET ANOTHER TALE. ONE EVEN OLDER:

IN A DESERT KINGDOM THE QUEEN OF THE SAND, QUEEN MARA RULED BY POWER BUT FEARED BETRAYAL. TO SECURE HER PALACE SHE ONLY KEPT THE ONES WHO AGREED TO HER. ONE DAY, IN A DREAM, A LITTLE GIRL TOLD HER: "THE MORE YOU HOLD THE SAND, THE FASTER IT RUNS AWAY." MA'RA REALIZED SHE NEEDED TO LISTEN AND CARE. SO THE NEXT MORNING SHE TOOK THE FASTEST HORSE TO THE COMMUNITY ASKING PEOPLE THEIR NEEDS. SHE INVITED CRITICISM. SO SHE CHANGED. SLOWLY THE WALLS OF SAND BECAME BRIDGES OF STONE.

FROM MA'RA, ELIRA LEARNED TO BE HUMBLE. POWER WITHOUT TRUST IS JUST ISOLATION ALONE IN A COLD PALACE FROM LIOR, SHE LEARNED TO SERVE OTHERS. LEADERSHIP IS NOT ABOUT HAVING A CROWN BUT HELPING YOUR COMMUNITY AND MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE.

AND FINALLY FROM HER OWN STORY ELIRA REWROTE THE LETTER AND PUT IT BACK FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS TO LEARN FROM HER MISTAKES. NOW, ELIRA IS STILL LEARNING - BUT SHE LISTENS, SERVES, AND LEADS WITH HEART.

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CARROT STORY

AFTER THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION, NO ONE'S UGLY AT CARROT'S SCHOOL.

LAST WEEK, THEY SAID THAT THEY SAW SOME PRE-TRANSFORMERS BEYOND THE BORDERS, BUT THAT'S JUST GOSSIP.

SO SHE REALLY COULDN'T TELL YOU WHY HALF OF HER FACE STARTED DISAPPEARING AT THE PARTY.

NOT THAT ANYONE COULD SEE, OF COURSE, BUT SHE COULD TELL. HIDING IN THE BATHROOM, LOOKING IN A MIRROR, SHE COULD TELL.

THIS DIDN'T MAKE SENSE. A GOOD PERSON IS A BEAUTIFUL PERSON.

MOTHER ALWAYS SAID, AS SHE STRAIGHTENED HER RIBBON. SHE FELT TEARS IN HER EYES, BUT EVEN THEY DISAPPEARED BEFORE THEY HIT THE FLOOR.

YOU KNOW WHAT THEY DO TO FACELESS PEOPLE? THEY PUT THEM IN CAGES. SO THEY DON'T HARM ANYONE, SO THEY DON'T HARM THEMSELVES.

CARROT WANTED TO BE GOOD, SHE DIDN'T WANT TO HURT, OR TO MAKE A MISTAKE.

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SHE DIDN'T WANT TO DISAPPEAR.

SHE RAN TO HER FRIEND AND TRIED TO TALK WHILE HER MOUTH WAS STILL THERE: "MY FACE, I'M LOSING IT".

HER FRIEND LOOKED AT HER AND LAUGHED: "OF COURSE, YOU ARE SILLY! AND GOOD RIDDANCE. NOW, YOU'RE BECOMING ONE OF US. NOW, YOU GET TO BE BEAUTIFUL!" AND SHE PULLED A MASK OFF HER BELOVED FRIEND'S FACE TO REVEAL A FACELESS HEAD UNDERNEATH.

CARROT STARTLED, HORRIFIED. SHE LOOKED BACK AT THE PARTY. SUDDENLY, THE FACES LOOKED TOO PLASTIC, TOO PERFECT. SUDDENLY, THEY WERE NOT FACES AT ALL, AND FIFTY IDENTICAL MASKS WERE STARING BACK AT HER.

SHE RAN OUT OF THE HOUSE, RAN AND RAN AND RAN. THERE WAS NO DIRECTION, ONLY FEAR, CONFUSION AND AT THE END – ACCEPTANCE.

SHE PAUSED WHEN SHE REACHED THE BORDER. "HOPEFULLY, THAT GOSSIP WAS TRUE AFTER ALL" – SHE THOUGHT AS SHE TOOK THE FIRST STEP.

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UNDER THE OLIVE TREE

THE NAMES OF ALL CHARACTERS AND PLACES IN THIS STORY HAVE BEEN CHANGED AND DO NOT IMPLY ANY RELATION OR ASSOCIATION TO THE REAL NAMES.

THE BRANCH FLEW AGAINST THE TRUNK OF THE TREE WITH A FORCE THAT EVEN SURPRISED OLIVER. WHEN HE THREW IT, HE KNEW HE WAS ANGRY, BUT HE COULDN'T HELP BUT BE STARTLED BY THE THUD OF CRUSHING WOOD AGAINST WOOD. UNDETERRED, HE CONTINUED:



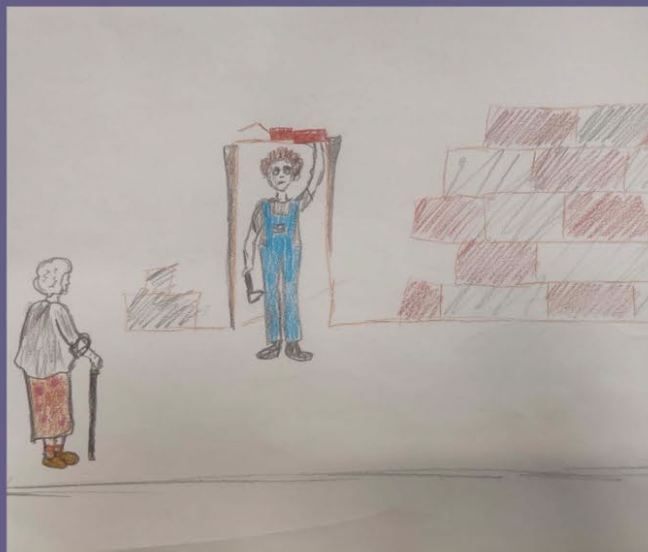
– “THEY WERE RIGHT! ALL I HEAR IN MY COMMUNITY ABOUT YOU PEOPLE IS THAT YOU ARE EXACTLY LIKE THIS, THAT YOU ALWAYS DO THIS! I DECIDED TO GIVE YOU A CHANCE, TO TRUST YOU, I REALLY TRIED, BUT YOU JUST PROVED ME WRONG.”

LITTLE WOULD OLIVER HAVE IMAGINED THAT HE WOULD BE UNDER THAT OLIVE TREE, WITH NIL STARING AT HIM, WHEN SIX MONTHS AGO HE WAS LAYING BRICK OVER BRICK AT GRANDMA'S DESTROYED BATHROOM. SHE WASN'T REALLY OLIVER'S GRANDMA, BUT SHE HAD BEEN IN OLIVER'S LIFE FOR AS LONG AS HE COULD REMEMBER. SHE HAD SEEN HIM GROW UP, HAD BROUGHT HIM TO SCHOOL AND TAKEN HIM TO HAVE ICE CREAM ON SATURDAYS AT THE LITTLE SHOP AROUND THE CORNER OF WHERE SHE LIVED, AND OLIVER HAD ALWAYS CALLED HER GRANDMA.

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IN ONE OF THE LAST DAYS OF THE CONFLICT, GRANDMA'S HOUSE HAD BEEN HIT BY A SMALL MORTAR BOMB, AND NOW THE RAIN CAME INTO HER BATHROOM THROUGH THE HOLE THAT IT HAD LEFT IN THE ROOF.

THIS WAS NOT THE FIRST ROOM OLIVER HAD HELPED TO REPAIR. DURING THE CONFLICT, HE HAD ALWAYS TRIED TO HELP IN ANY WAY HE COULD TO LESSEN THE TOLL THE CONFLICT HAD TAKEN ON HIS COMMUNITY.

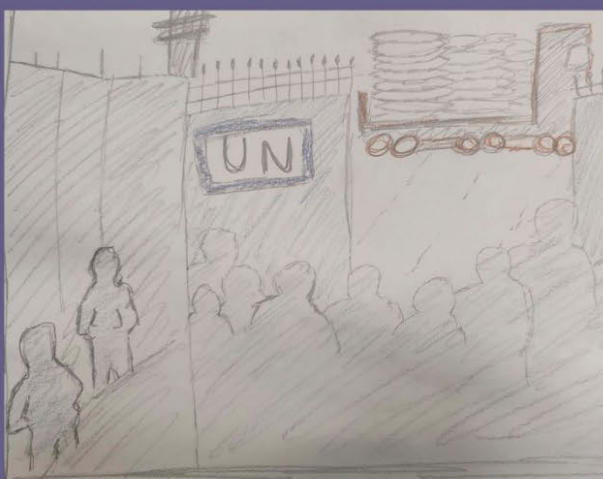


HIS HOUSE HAD LUCKILY BEEN SPARED, BUT PEOPLE ALL AROUND HIM NEEDED ALL SORTS OF HELP, FROM BEING BROUGHT TO THE LITTLE FIELD HOSPITAL JUST OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE TO COLLECTING FOOD AT THE HUMANITARIAN AID DELIVERY POINT, LOCATED BETWEEN HIS COMMUNITY AND THE "OTHER" COMMUNITY, THOSE WHO HAD DONE THEM SO MUCH HARM. THIS DIDN'T CHANGE AFTER THE GUNS FELL SILENT, SINCE, IF ANYTHING, THE NEEDS OF HIS COMMUNITY BECAME MORE DEMANDING AND TIME-CONSUMING IN THE ABSENCE OF VIOLENCE.

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DURING ONE OF HIS REGULAR TRIPS TO THE HUMANITARIAN AID DELIVERY POINT, OLIVER NOTICED A YOUNG MAN A FEW METERS IN FRONT OF HIM IN THE LINE.

AFTER THE CONFLICT BROKE OUT, PEOPLE FROM THE TWO COMMUNITIES HAD STOPPED ENCOUNTERING, EXCEPT WHEN PLACED TWENTY METERS APART AND WITH A GUN POINTED AT EACH OTHER. YEARS HAD PASSED SINCE,



AND NOW, SEEING HIM FOR THE FIRST TIME, HE REALISED HE HAD GROWN OLDER. HE ALSO REALISED THAT FOR SOME REASON, SOMETHING IN HIM REALLY MOVED WHEN HE SAW HIM. IT WASN'T THE SAME KIND OF MOVEMENT HE HAD WHEN HE SAW OTHER PEOPLE FROM THE "OTHER" COMMUNITY, A FEELING OF ANGER AT THE PAIN THEY HAD CAUSED TO HIS PEOPLE. GRUDGINGLY, HE HAD TO ADMIT TO HIMSELF THAT HE REALLY LIKED HIM.

IN THE NEXT DAYS, HE SAW HIM A FEW MORE TIMES, AND EACH TIME HE WOULD NOTICE SOMETHING NEW, THE WAY HIS HAIR BRUSHED AGAINST HIS EARS WHEN THE AIR BLEW, HOW HE WOULD BITE HIS LIP WHEN HE WAS ABSENT-MINDED.

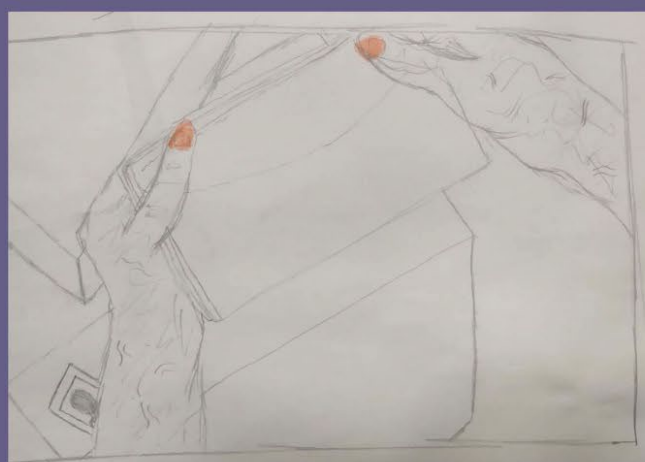
NONETHELESS, OLIVER DECIDED TO KEEP IT TO HIMSELF AND NOT TALK TO HIM. IT FELT LIKE A BETRAYAL OF HIS COMMUNITY, A SELFISH ACT OF PURSUING WHAT HE THOUGHT COULD, BUT HOPED WAS NOT LOVE, WHICH NECESSARILY HAD TO MEAN HURTING AND TURNING HIS BACK ON THE COMMUNITY HE LOVED TO SERVE AND SUPPORT.

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ONE OF THESE DAYS, HE WAS INSTALLING THE WIRES IN GRANDMA'S HOUSE WHILE TALKING TO HER, AND HE INVARIABLY STARTED TALKING TO HER ABOUT THE GUY, WHOM SOMEONE AROUND HIM HAD CALLED NIL. OLIVER DIDN'T NECESSARILY WANT TO SHARE HOW HE FELT ABOUT NIL – HE ONLY WANTED TO SHARE THAT HE HAD SEEN HIM, SINCE GRANDMA ALSO KNEW HIM FROM BEFORE THE WAR. HE MUST HAVE SAID SOMETHING ABOUT NIL OR TALKED A LITTLE BIT TOO LONG ABOUT HIM, SINCE AT SOME POINT GRANDMA LOOKED AT OLIVER, SMILED CHEEKILY AND DRYLY SAID: “YOU REALLY LIKE HIM, HUH?”

OLIVER STARTED PROTESTING, DENYING THAT GRAVE ACCUSATION IN THE STRONGEST TERMS, NOT WITHOUT BLUSHING DUE TO HIS OBVIOUS INABILITY TO HIDE HIS FEELINGS FROM GRANDMA. INSTEAD OF CONTRADICTING OLIVER, GRANDMA SIMPLY STOOD UP, WENT TO THE KITCHEN AND FETCHED AN OLD SHOE BOX FROM UNDER THE DRAWER WHERE SHE KEPT HER BREAD.

SHE SAT BACK DOWN NEXT TO OLIVER, WHO STILL DESPERATELY TRIED TO MAKE HIS CASE FOR HIS INNOCENCE, OPENED THE BOX AND FETCHED SOME LETTERS AND SOME PICTURES.



– “THERE IS SOMETHING THAT YOU DON'T KNOW, SOMETHING THAT ONLY A FEW IN THIS TOWN ARE OLD ENOUGH TO REMEMBER - AND THEY WILL NOT REMEMBER BECAUSE THEY ARE OLD. THESE WERE SENT TO ME BY SOMEONE WHOM I KNEW BEFORE THE WAR.

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HE WAS A BAKER IN THE “OTHER” COMMUNITY, AND I LOVED HIM VERY MUCH. HE ALSO LOVED ME VERY MUCH, AND SO WE WOULD MEET IN SECRET UNDER THE OLIVE TREE THAT GROWS JUST BEHIND THE CITY. OUR FAMILIES DIDN'T KNOW, OF COURSE, AND WHILE WE OFTEN THOUGHT ABOUT TELLING THEM, IN THE END, WE NEVER DID. AS THE CONFLICT THREATENED TO ESCALATE, WE SAW EACH OTHER LESS AND LESS. AND THEN THE CONFLICT STARTED. A FEW DAYS AFTER THE FIRST SHOTS FELL, A BULLET FROM ONE OF OUR SNIPERS MADE MY BIGGEST FEAR COME TRUE – I WOULD NEVER SEE HIM AGAIN. SINCE THEN, I HAVE ALWAYS REGRETTED NOT BEING BRAVE ENOUGH TO LOVE HIM HOW I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO LOVE HIM. THE SAME WAY THAT YOU WILL REGRET NOT TALKING TO NIL IN A FEW YEARS. NOW GO, AND DON'T COME BACK UNTIL YOU HAVE TALKED TO HIM.”

STILL PROCESSING WHAT GRANDMA HAD JUST TOLD HIM, HE LEFT HER HOUSE, WENT TO HIS OWN LITTLE HOUSE AND WENT TO SLEEP. HE HAD NOT AT ALL EXPECTED TO HEAR WHAT HE JUST HAD, AND HONESTLY, HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO THINK OF IT. THAT NIGHT, HE DREAMT OF NIL.

THE NEXT TIME HE WENT TO THE HUMANITARIAN AID DELIVERY POINT, OLIVER WAS HOLDING A LITTLE PIECE OF PAPER IN HIS HAND. HIS PLAN WAS SIMPLE: FIND NIL, GIVE HIM THE PIECE OF PAPER WITHOUT ANYONE AROUND SEEING IT, AND GO BACK WITH THE FOOD SUPPLIES AS IF NOTHING HAD HAPPENED. AS HE ARRIVED AT THE HUMANITARIAN AID POINT, HE LOOKED AROUND BUT DIDN'T SEE NIL. HIS NERVES STARTED TO SWELL, FEARING THAT HE MIGHT NOT BE COMING TODAY.

AFTER A WHILE LOOKING FOR NIL, OLIVER RESIGNED, CONVINCED THAT HE MIGHT HAVE TO DELIVER HIS LITTLE MESSAGE THE NEXT DAY, AND PUT THE PIECE OF PAPER IN HIS POCKET.

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HE GOT TO THE DISTRIBUTION DESK, GOT HIS AND TWO OF HIS NEIGHBOUR'S RATIONS AND TURNED AWAY. AS HE TURNED, HE FROZE. IN HIS PANIC, HE HAD FORGOTTEN TO TURN AROUND. AND HERE HE WAS, NIL, JUST TWO PEOPLE BEHIND HIM IN THE QUEUE. MAKING QUITE AN EFFORT, HE PUSHED THE RATIONS ONTO HIS LEFT SHOULDER AND DISCREETLY TOOK OUT THE LITTLE PAPER FROM HIS RIGHT POCKET AGAIN. AS HE PASSED NIL, HE GENTLY PLACED THE PIECE OF PAPER IN NIL'S HAND IN WHAT FROM THE OUTSIDE JUST LOOKED LIKE A BRUSHING, HOPING THAT HE WOULD NOT GIVE HIM AWAY. TO HIS RELIEF, NIL JUST CLOSED HIS HAND, THE PIECE OF PAPER SAFELY IN IT. ON THE PAPER, NIL WOULD FIND THE FOLLOWING: "MEET ME UNDER THE OLIVE TREE OUTSIDE THE CITY. TOMORROW, 9.30 PM. OLIVER".

THE NEXT DAY, OLIVER ARRIVED AT THE OLIVE TREE AT 9.00 PM. HE HADN'T BEEN ABLE TO WAIT ANY LONGER, SO CAREFULLY, WITHOUT ANYONE SEEING HIM, HE WALKED OVER AND WAITED.

AFTER A WHILE, HE SAW SOMEONE APPROACHING, COMING FROM THE DIRECTION WHERE THE "OTHER" COMMUNITY LIVED. SUDDENLY, HE REALISED THAT HE COULD BE IN TROUBLE IF THE PERSON APPROACHING WAS NOT NIL. HE HID BEHIND THE TREE, WITH A STONE IN HIS HAND IN CASE HE NEEDED TO DEFEND HIMSELF. AS THE PERSON CAME CLOSER, HE RECOGNISED NIL, AND OLIVER CAME OUT OF HIS HIDING PLACE. THE TWO MEN STOOD IN FRONT OF EACH OTHER FOR A WHILE, NOT SURE WHAT TO SAY OR WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN.

- "HI", SAID NIL, WITH A MIX OF SCEPTICISM AND CURIOSITY IN HIS VOICE.

- "HI", ANSWERED OLIVER, STILL UNSURE WHAT TO SAY.

- "YOU ASKED ME TO COME?" NIL ASKED.

- "WELL, YES... I GUESS I JUST WANTED TO GET TO KNOW YOU", OLIVER SAID.

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AT THIS, NIL HESITATED FOR A WHILE, BEFORE SITTING DOWN BY THE OLIVE TREE, EXPECTANTLY LOOKING AT OLIVER. HE SAT DOWN TOO.



SLOWLY, THEY MANAGED TO OPEN UP MORE, AND DISCOVERED THAT, IN FACT, THEY SHARED A LOT OF INTERESTS AND TASTES. ONE THING, HOWEVER, THEY WOULD CONSISTENTLY AVOID TALKING ABOUT: THE CONFLICT.

BOTH WERE TOO AFRAID THAT IT MIGHT TRIGGER SOMETHING IN THE OTHER, AND BREAK THE BEAUTIFUL RELATIONSHIP THAT HAD BEEN DEVELOPING IN THE LAST MONTHS.

ONE DAY, THEY MET AFTER OLIVER HAD HAD TO DEAL WITH SOME TOUGH SITUATIONS IN HIS COMMUNITY. GRANDMA HAD GOTTEN SICK, AND SOME PEOPLE WERE STARTING TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT WHERE HE WENT ALL THOSE EVENINGS. IT DIDN'T STOP HIM FROM COMING, BUT HE WAS DEFINITELY MORE ABSENT-MINDED AND SENSIBLE. OUT OF A SUDDEN, HE HEARD NIL SAY IN PASSING SOMETHING HE COULD NOT BELIEVE HE HAD JUST SAID:

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“...WHEN YOUR PEOPLE STARTED THE WAR...”. OLIVER LOCKED EYES WITH HIM, AND WITH TREMBLING VOICE ASKED:

– “WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?”

– “WHAT? I WAS JUST SAYING THAT I WAS COMING BACK FROM SCHOOL WHEN YOUR COMMUNITY STARTED THE WAR, SO I COULDN'T...”

OLIVER STOOD UP, OVERTAKEN BY RAGE AND HIS HEAD SPINNING. FULL OF ANGER, HE GRABBED A BRANCH OF THE OLIVE TREE AND BROKE IT OFF. THE BRANCH CAME OFF WITH A LOUD THUD, AS OLIVER STILL HAD HIS EYES LOCKED ON NIL. “THEY WERE RIGHT”, HE SAID WITH TEARS IN HIS EYES. “I DIDN'T WANT TO BELIEVE IT, BUT THEY WERE RIGHT”. HE TURNED AWAY FROM NIL, AND IN A FIT OF RAGE, HE THREW THE BRANCH AGAINST THE OLIVE TREE'S TRUNK. THE BRANCH FLEW AGAINST THE TRUNK OF THE TREE WITH A FORCE THAT EVEN SURPRISED OLIVER. WHEN HE THREW IT, ALTHOUGH HE COULD FEEL HE WAS ANGRY, HE COULDN'T HELP BUT BE STARTLED BY THE THUD OF CRUSHING WOOD AGAINST WOOD. STILL LOOKING AWAY FROM HIM, AND WITH TEARS IN HIS EYES, HE CONTINUED:

– “THEY WERE RIGHT! ALL I HEAR IN MY COMMUNITY ABOUT YOU PEOPLE IS THAT YOU ARE EXACTLY LIKE THIS, THAT YOU ALWAYS DO THIS! I DECIDED TO GIVE YOU A CHANCE, TO TRUST YOU, I REALLY TRIED, BUT YOU JUST PROVED ME WRONG. ALL THE SUFFERING YOU CAUSED ON OUR PEOPLE. ALL THE PEOPLE CLOSE TO ME THAT YOU KILLED. ALL THE BEAUTIFUL BUILDINGS OF MY CHILDHOOD THAT YOU DESTROYED. AND YOU ACCUSE US TO HAVE STARTED THE CONFLICT??? HOW DARE YOU!”

THE NEXT THING THAT HAPPENED SURPRISED OLIVER. INSTEAD OF CRYING BACK AT OLIVER, NIL APPROACHED OLIVER, SLOWLY, PUT HIS HANDS ON OLIVER'S SHOULDERS, GENTLY DRAGGED HIM TO HIS CHEST AND EMBRACED HIM IN A FIRM, TENDER HUG.