

The challenges ahead of us are not big – they are gigantic'

30 December 2024 Marcus Klöckner

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Millions on the streets, standing up for peace? This is urgently needed, says Reiner Braun, a veteran of the peace movement, in an interview with *Overtone Magazine*. A conversation about war, peace, and the coming year 2025.

Marcus Klöckner in conversation with Reiner Braun.

Mr Braun, you have been active in the peace movement for many decades and have probably seen and experienced a lot. The year 2024 is now coming to an end. What is your personal conclusion? What is the situation regarding peace in Europe?

I consider 2024 to be a year of transition. Geopolitically, in terms of the contradictory tendency towards multipolarity, and in Europe, in terms of the confrontation with Russia and the war in Ukraine. But also in terms of domestic policy, with regard to the dimension of rearmament, the militarisation of society and the comprehensive dismantling of the welfare state.

What does this development mean for 2025?

Much will become clearer in 2025 – in both directions, more peaceful or even more confrontational and warlike. I very much hope that Israel's genocide against the Palestinians will end and that after the changes in Syria, the confusing situation there will not develop into a regional disaster à la Libya and Iraq. What will unfortunately be taken over from 2024 to 2025 is the danger of a major war, even a war in Europe with nuclear weapons, which has not existed in this dimension since 1945. That is why the constant that will remain is the necessary action, the joint action of the peace movement. With the nationwide demonstration on 3 October, we sent a clear signal of revival. And with the Berlin Appeal against the new medium-range weapons, we have created an instrument for a large collection of signatures, which will hopefully really lead to us being able to speak of a peace movement as a mass movement for peace and against war again in 2025, actively involving broad sections of the population. The challenges that lie ahead of us can no longer be described as just great, but only as gigantic. I hope that the 'David Peace Movement' will develop the strength of a 'Hercules' to bring down the 'war Goliaths'. We must do this as a peace movement out of responsibility for Europe and the world, out of deep humanism. Big words that have to become reality day after day in sometimes annoying and exhausting detail work (and big actions). With more comrades-in-arms, with more understanding and solidarity and an even greater international outlook. I say this not out of pathos, but because I consider the dangers to peace to be insanely great and the international situation to be more than extremely dangerous – not only in the war in Ukraine, but in various conflict zones around the world, and therefore repeatedly associated with the threat of nuclear war.

The CDU's candidate for Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, recently said: 'Peace can be found in every cemetery.' What are your thoughts when you hear this statement?

At first I was speechless and horrified by the lack of respect for this statement. Does he even know what he is talking about and what war means? Is he trivialising the greatest danger to life through war because Blackrock believes it has found a niche to survive? In view of this statement, one is reminded of the books by Erich Maria Remarque 'All Quiet on the Western Front' or Bertha von Suttner 'Lay Down Your Arms'. Have the terrible images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki never come to Friedrich Merz's mind or memory? Anyone who deals so irresponsibly with 'war' and the possible death of millions is unsuitable in every respect for a leadership position in Germany.

How do you rate Merz as a chancellor candidate? What can Germany expect if Merz actually becomes chancellor?

First of all, he has not yet been elected and the resistance against such an outspoken Blackrock representative in the chancellor's office is quite strong – perhaps with the exception of the Greens. Sarcastic one could say with Heinrich Heine: 'When I think of Germany at night, I am deprived of sleep!' Politically, Merz is supposed to be the ideal representative of the military-industrial complex, of warlike aggression against Russia and of the ruthless dismantling of the welfare state. Merz stands for the personalisation of the subordination of German interests to US interests and thus for further deindustrialisation. Symbolically speaking: everything for the Atlantic bridge and unconditional support for NATO's war course. Merz's support for the Taurus missile defence system, which could lead Europe into a nuclear confrontation with Russia, is emblematic of this course. He hates multipolarity and wants to regain the lost Western hegemony by all means, including war, sanctions and regime change. Merz-Germany is leading the way with the EU behind it.

At the beginning of December, there was a nationwide day of action by the initiative 'Never Again War – Down with the Arms Trade'. The aim was to support the 'Berlin Appeal'. What is this appeal about?

We want to develop a broad movement against the first-strike weapons of the USA – which are to be stationed exclusively in Germany – from the Berlin Appeal against the new medium-range weapons with the collection of signatures. A movement in which many people express their protest with their signature but can also be motivated to become more involved and intervene. The signature campaign will be accompanied by further actions such as the demonstration at the location of the operations centre of the new weapons in Wiesbaden/Mainz Castel. The appeal focuses on our government saying no, and thus follows Karl Liebknecht's basic idea that 'the enemy is in our own country'. It is the concentration on the core demand that an increased risk of war is coming from our country, and at the same time, in the sense of 'missiles are magnets', we are also the main targets of a counter- or preventive strike. As in the 80s, it is – contrary to Pistorius' claims – a pre-armament that Russia will obviously respond to with countermeasures. A new turn of the escalation spiral with further instability. A particular threat certainly comes from the US hypersonic weapons 'Dark Eagle': It is therefore an appeal of reason, which focuses on the central danger and its prevention and thus hopefully opens the way to further measures of disarmament - conventional and nuclear. This focus – without political or, as some would say, ideological classification or commentary – is already enabling widespread support. The group of initial signatories is clear proof of this. Everyone should be able to participate and contribute to averting the great danger that hangs over all of us and our country. May I appeal to your readers?

What dangers do you see in the deployment of US medium-range missiles in Germany?

Don't we already have enough nuclear weapons in Europe? And now also conventional first-strike weapons, the Tomahawks and perhaps the most dangerous of all is Dark Eagle, a hypersonic weapon that is barely recognisable and cannot be shot down. Once these weapons have been stationed, the USA would then have the capability to eliminate Russian command centres, government agencies and missile silos from German soil, with virtually no warning, because it would be almost impossible for Russian interceptor systems to neutralise an attack. In particular, there would be a danger of a 'decapitation strike' that could eliminate Russia's top leaders. In any case, medium-range weapons – if one wants to use this term at all – are never so-called defensive weapons, but first-strike weapons that preemptively destroy the brain and ventricles of the Russian army, including the Russian deployment and command heights. With the deployment decided between Biden and Scholz for 2026, completely outside of any democratic say, Germany is at the mercy of the threat scenario of the USA, a country that is not itself affected and whose erratic president is Donald Trump. As can be seen in Ukraine, such a threatening constellation can quickly turn into a hot war if one side feels too much under pressure from the other – only this time it can end in a nuclear inferno. Fundamentally, we have to get away from the 'logic' of deterrence.

Deutsche Welle's headline is: ['Poland has made firearms training compulsory for primary school children in preparation for a possible Russian attack'](#). The video shows 13- and 14-year-old pupils training with weapons. Poland is an EU member state and also a NATO member. What is happening here?

Poland is at least violating the spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Germany has even created a children's army with 7000 minors. The darkest memories of German history – under which Poland in particular suffered – are coming back. The Volkssturm and children were supposed to save German fascism

and perished miserably by the thousands. Poland's critical position on Russia, which is partly understandable given its history, is being misused by Poland to legitimise aggressive military rearmament and the construction of an enemy stereotype, and a young generation is to be shot and made ready for war. We will see whether this really succeeds. Poland has positioned itself as the most loyal US vassal in Europe at an early stage in various formats ('Bucharest 9', Visegrad states, etc.). For some time now, it has been competing with Germany for the military or simply warlike role in Europe, also as a counterweight to Germany, as well as for the role of the Eastern European hegemonic power. This militaristic tendency cannot be explained by the 'protective relationship' of Ukraine alone, since increasing tensions can be observed between these two states (including Ukraine's lack of insight into its responsibility for 100,000 dead Poles in the 1943 massacre in Volhynia). Perhaps Poland's own recent plans, such as the 'Eastern Federation' (Pilsudski) or the reintegration of part of Ukraine (Volhynia), are playing a role? We should never underestimate the fact that Poland still has to find its political role in Europe after 1990. In my opinion, it will not be enough in an increasingly multipolar world with a weakened EU to try to do so only in a militaristic way, with the projection of Russia as the enemy and as a loyal vassal of the USA.

But there is hardly any resistance. Citizens accept a lot. Does German society understand what is happening around them?

Perhaps we – as a peace movement – do not understand enough how to address people and how to approach them. In the new Shell Youth Study, 81% of young people expect a military conflict in Europe. The uncertainty, concern and even fear of the people becomes apparent in every survey conducted by ARD or ZDF, with surprisingly solid critical attitudes being maintained. The majority have long since repeatedly spoken out in favour of diplomatic solutions. On the other hand, a recent survey confirmed that 72% of Germans feel 'protected' by NATO. For the vast majority of the population, doubting 'big brother' and his global military apparatus is not particularly appropriate. The ambivalence of the way people in our country reflect on the political situation is unmistakable and, in view of the prevailing war and rearmament propaganda of politics and the media, can be seen as a positive thing from a peace policy perspective. However, the targeted manipulation, attempts to stultify people, defamation of critical positions, inflammatory and sensationalist war propaganda must also be mentioned. Politics and the media have entered into an opaque conglomerate of opinion manipulation to stabilise a warmongering policy. This 'anti-enlightenment' is of course bearing fruit, since a lack of understanding of geopolitical interrelationships leads to a widespread feeling of being at the mercy of forces beyond one's control and simply to fear, which also irrationally seeks protection and security. Enlightenment must become the linchpin of the peace movement's activities. Enlightenment is the central challenge. Techniques of political and media manipulation must also be pushed back by strengthening participatory autonomous media power. We – as peace activists – must understand more than ever that we have to approach people and their organisations in order to achieve new social constellations and majorities. Many old things (e.g. meaningless disputes) have to be thrown overboard to achieve this, and opening up the peace movement to a reorganisation is also on the agenda.

The slogan in Germany is: 'We must become war-ready.' Defence Minister Pistorius spoke out in an article a few days ago and reaffirmed the plan for war readiness. 'We need a war-ready Bundeswehr' is the headline of the article in Die Welt. Have you read the article? What do you think about it?

I'll try to put myself in the militaristic mindset that only a heavily armed country with a large army, many weapons, that is, a war-ready army, can secure peace. The first question that comes to mind is: who can finance this bloated army without completely ruining the population and its social system? The new US president, who is demanding not just 2% but 5% of the gross national product from NATO countries in the future, shows where this is headed. Ms Baerbock will certainly be the first to welcome this. Then, what is to be defended? In this industrialised, densely populated Europe, even a conventional war would have apocalyptic consequences. Nuclear power plants (over 80 in Europe) would be blown up) chemical complexes would contaminate the environment. The number of civilian deaths and refugees would be impossible to contain. Europe is structurally incapable of war. Therefore, a Europe-wide war must be prevented by all means. A Europe-wide war of belligerent armies would almost inevitably be a nuclear war, the side that would lose the war would resort to this weapon of mass destruction. The result would be a satellite image of Hiroshima over

Europe or as the doctors would put it: the (few) living would envy the dead. What remains is propaganda: the evil Russians or Putin will attack us (in five years or sooner or later) if we don't arm ourselves to the teeth. Greenpeace, with the support of a renowned peace researcher, has produced a study on this subject that says: that NATO as a whole is at least three to five times superior to Russia in all central weapon categories. Even without the US, the European states still have a significant military advantage. The idea of Russia attacking NATO is a fantasy of all those who have a lot to gain politically or in terms of profit from this propaganda. This was the case during the first Cold War and it is the case again today. The threat from the Soviet Union or Russia was and is a lie used to legitimise rearmament despite the different social systems. Pistorius is nothing more than a propagandist of the military-industrial complex and – unfortunately I have to say it so bluntly – a dangerous war propagandist. The fact remains: Europe is damned to peace and thus also to cooperation with the largest country in Europe, Russia.

What should citizens do to counter this development?

In order to really achieve changes towards peace and social as well as ecological justice, a reduced spectator-nagging democracy, with justified daily criticism and often wrong voting decisions, must become the willingness to actively interfere, to engage and to protest – in the best case by millions. This is certainly not only but also the task of the peace movement. Other social movements and trade unions are also called upon. But since 'nothing is possible without peace', a special responsibility lies with the peace movement, or rather with the cooperation of the peace movement with the political forces mentioned above. At the end of 2024, we are certainly only at the beginning here, with mountains of hurdles and problems ahead of us. Overcoming the policy of silence in the 'war and peace question' of the trade union leaderships towards the federal government, as well as the crises of the formerly important social movements such as ATTAC and the further development of Fridays for Peace are just a few of the developments that are necessary to achieve a broad social peace movement. It should not be forgotten that the churches – unlike in the 1980s – show almost more understanding for war than for peace. Positive exceptions of impressive actors for peace from all these organisations should be positively emphasised here. The cooperation with parties and party structures connected to peace must be sustainably developed. Certainly, this also includes overcoming any small-minded, defamatory disputes in the peace movement, which consists of historically developed and now also new structures. All this requires, first and foremost, reaching out to the people in our country. Without this, there will be no overcoming of social structures that hinder more action in the future. Whether this is also connected with the development of new structures in and around the peace movement will be decided – thanks to Marx – not at the round table and in the back room, but in social struggles. The existing problems are certainly impressive and should not be underestimated, but they are minor compared to the challenges we face in the current acute situation of political confrontation. For the sake of peace, indeed for the sake of survival, it is certainly worthwhile to face these challenges together.