

UN retirees, the Russia-Ukraine war and the future of the UN – what can we do?

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The United Nations garden in New York contains several sculptures and statues that have been donated by different countries. This one is called *Let us beat swords into plowshares* and was a gift from the then USSR presented in 1959. Made by Evgeniy Vuchetich, the bronze statue represents the figure of a man holding a hammer in one hand and, in the other, a sword which he is making into a plowshare, symbolizing man's desire to put an end to war and convert the means of destruction into creative tools for the benefit of all mankind.

After the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces in February 2022, under the guise of a “special military operation”, the Director of the Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability (FOGGS), Georgios Kostakos, launched an initiative to mobilize former UN retirees, like himself, to enter into discussions both among themselves and with the

UN Secretary-General's office, with a view to encouraging the UN and the SG himself to take on a more proactive role in addressing the flagrant violation of the UN Charter which the Ukraine invasion represented.

This was prompted by the observation that the UN had been both somewhat slow to react to Russia's action as well as hamstrung by the veto exercised by Russia in the Security Council, which effectively tied the hands of the international community to react with the energy required. In a nutshell, it seemed to be an example of failed global governance, with no winners.

Soon afterwards, a series of Zoom discussions convened by FOGGS brought together a small group of former UN senior officials located in different parts of the world, with substantial knowledge and experience of the issues and countries involved. This group later evolved into a Peacemaking Reflection Group (PRG), resulting in a decision to send a signed letter to the Secretary-General advocating for his urgent intervention. This was signed by 220 former staff members and sent on 15 April 2022. Whether by coincidence or not, the very next week, the Secretary-General carried out missions to both Moscow and Kyiv, and engaged in initial face-to-face discussions with Presidents Putin and Zelensky, and their staffs.

The PRG would like to think that it may have accelerated action by the SG to play a more proactive role in addressing the many security and humanitarian issues that had arisen as a result of the invasion. Shortly afterwards, while no progress could

be made in bringing about peace on the battlefield, UN involvement was manifest in the agreement of the Black Sea Grain Initiative (July 2022, sadly not renewed in July 2023) on the safe transportation of grain and foodstuffs from Ukrainian ports that was linked to efforts to ensure that Russian food and fertilizer reached global markets.

Since its inception, the PRG has met on Zoom on a regular basis to discuss and prepare proposals for action which could be taken by the UN. To date these have resulted in a number of strategic actions targeted at different audiences, including:

- first letter to the UN Secretary-General (15 April 2022)
- appeal to world leaders and to the UNSG on the occasion of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly (7 September 2022)
- letter to the G20 Summit powers, Bali, Indonesia (November 2022)
- armistice call (11 November 2022)
- contribution to the UNSG's New Agenda for Peace (15 January 2023)
- second letter to the UNSG (26 April 2023), appeal to the UNSG and the Security Council to urgently prevent nuclear disaster at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (July 2023).

The work of the PRG has complemented the involvement of individual members in other fora where they have been able to interact with high-level decision-makers and make an impact on proceedings. For instance, following PRG consultations with the secretariat of the InterAction Council (comprised of former presidents and prime ministers),

a group of PRG representatives was invited to participate in the InterAction Council's expert and annual plenary meetings in May 2023 in Valetta, Malta, where they brought to the attention of the former world leaders the PRG's contributions. The participation of PRG members had a significant impact on the recommendations of the IAC.

Members have also participated in meetings of the Academic Council of the UN System (ACUNS) and the annual Global Baku Forum of former presidents and prime ministers of 80–100 countries, plus other global leaders from civil society, business, etc. The PRG's visibility was unprecedented in this distinguished forum of world leaders, who bring such matters to the attention of their successors-in-office and the UNSG.

While the long-term impact of the PRG on the decision-making of the UN in the context of the Ukraine crisis is not known, experience has shown that the informal mechanism of the PRG and the efforts of interested individuals have provided unique opportunities for UN retirees to use their experience and expertise to continue their involvement in international and UN affairs. It has also helped them to uphold the values of the organization that they served during their careers and to contribute to the UN System's response in a world where the organization's mandates, voices and capacities are not being fully used in accordance with the Charter.

Looking ahead, the PRG is preparing a paper that could be presented to the UN community at a FOGGS event in New York in September 2023, to include a discussion and recommendations on some of its key areas of concern. These will include issues relating to the New Agenda for Peace (NA4P), the legal framework of the UN Charter, the

role of the UN Secretary-General in conflict prevention and resolution, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the UN, and the development of a more effective peace architecture.

In conclusion, the PRG serves as a timely reminder that there is scope, and a need, for UN retirees including potentially BAFUNCS members, to use their past experience to contribute in the above ways, if they so choose, and that the PRG has proved to be a useful mechanism to do so. Anyone interested is invited to contact the Convenor, Georgios Kostakos, at georgios.kostakos@foggs.org.

Established in Brussels in 2013, FOGGS is a "think-and-do tank", serving at the same time as a research and ideas-generation centre, discussion forum and advocacy mechanism. While fully recognizing that the world today is different from the times of their active service, members of the Peacemaking Reflection Group (PRG) strongly believe that the UN Charter's principles and provisions remain valid, and that what needs to change is how these principles and provisions are being applied, as a standard for national and international politics and interactions between and among State and non-State actors. The Group respects political diversity and wishes to advocate for innovative ways and means to apply the UN Charter, in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts and achieve sustainable development with human rights for all.

Guided by the UN Charter and other instruments, PRG members, while drawing on their diverse experiences as international civil servants, have come together to:

- exchange views and inform each other about current developments in global politics, economics and governance;
- reflect collectively on innovative ways to strengthen

the UN and other global governance arrangements, with a view to ensuring their optimal and effective functioning towards advancing the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;

- make key interventions and intercessions, public or private, through letters, articles and other means to inform the public and influence decision-makers for the common good;
- consider, develop and advance concrete initiatives to address today's global challenges in peace and security, sustainable development and humanitarian affairs/human rights;
- build partnerships with other groups and individuals, experts, activists or otherwise, to discuss developments, exchange views and experiences, reflect on possible interventions, and join forces to carry out shared initiatives.

Source; FOGGS website.

Further information

InterAction Council, Malta: <https://www.interactioncouncil.org/our-work/meetings/annual-plenary-meetings/37th-annual-plenary-meeting>;
<https://www.interactioncouncil.org/index.php/publications/37th-annual-plenary-meeting>;
<https://www.interactioncouncil.org/publications/malta-declaration-multilateral-solutions-better-future>;
<https://www.interactioncouncil.org/index.php/media-centre/former-world-leaders-call-reform-un-security-council>.

Frank O'Donnell. *Desperate hope*. PRG Monograph.

Türk D (Chairman, Club de Madrid). *Breakthrough for people and planet – Effective and inclusive governance for today and the future*: <https://clubmadrid.org/a-new-blueprint-calls-for-reinvigorated-global-governance/>.