

LETTER



Hugs, intensive discussions, exchange of experiences and activism. That's what an IPPNW meeting is about

Kati Juva

Physicians for Social Responsibility, Finland

A letter from IPPNW's European Meeting in Hamburg

IPPNW (International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War) is a worldwide organization of physicians and medical students with national affiliates in over 30 countries. It was founded over 40 years ago and is one of the few international NGOs with active members in all the original nuclear weapons states including Russia.

IPPNW's European region had an intensive and successful meeting in Hamburg on 20–22 January 2023 organized by the German affiliate. We were over 40 people from around Europe representing 11 different countries. It was also possible to attend some sessions virtually.

Discussion was mainly about the rising threat of nuclear war due to the current war in Ukraine. The Russian government has raised the possibility of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine and the risk of a nuclear war is now greater than it has been for decades. A great worry is also that the largest nuclear power plant in Europe, Zaporizhzhia, is occupied by Russian forces and there is constant fighting around that area. This situation could result in a nuclear accident even without use of nuclear warheads.

We also discussed the causes of the war in Ukraine and were unanimous about the Russian government's sole guilt for the unlawful invasion of Ukraine. There was somewhat more variation in opinion as to whether the 'west' has some responsibility for not understanding the security worries of Russia, and whether, with some more diplomatic or careful actions during the last decade the escalation could have been avoided. These discussions were very interesting, and the atmosphere was all the time respectful with people listening to each other. We did not publish any statement on this.

As most countries represented in Hamburg were NATO countries, or applicants as Finland and Sweden are, there was much discussion about nuclear weapons and nuclear sharing in European NATO countries. NATO defines itself as a Nuclear Alliance and bases its doctrine on deterrence. For us

CONTACT Kati Juva  juva.kati@gmail.com

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it is clear, that deterrence is a very fragile and dangerous construction. Nuclear war can begin by mistake or by accident. There have been dozens of near-miss-situations, where pure luck has prevented a nuclear explosion or the launching of nuclear missiles. Deterrence has also proved to be unsuccessful in preventing wars as its defenders claim it can. Deterrence has actually enabled Putin to invade Ukraine without fear of NATO's involvement because of the threat of nuclear escalation.

Different IPPNW affiliates have a broader spectrum of activities besides opposing nuclear weapons. Some affiliates (as in Sweden) concentrate purely on nuclear weapons while some have a very broad agenda including, for example, work on climate change and human rights (as in Britain and Finland). Many, especially Central European affiliates, make a strong connection between nuclear weapons and nuclear power. This link and the concern of a nuclear accident during a conflict has grown even stronger due to the battles around Zaporizhzhia. In Hamburg there was a whole workshop about nuclear power, although not all IPPNW affiliates take part in this campaign.

One very interesting presentation was given by a Finnish peace researcher Tarja Cronberg. She talked about deterrence and NATO and raised (or revitalized) the idea of Nuclear Free Zones. Norway, Denmark and Iceland have declared they do not permit nuclear weapons on their soil, and Finland and Sweden also will probably take that position in NATO, although they have not declared any official prerequisites for membership. The goal could be to create a Nuclear Free Nordic countries zone within NATO. In order to have any meaning the Nuclear Free Zones would of course need security guarantees from nuclear weapon states. They should declare they will never attack these zones with nuclear weapons. Some of the world's Nuclear Free Zones have such guarantees at least from some nuclear weapon states. Whatever uncertainties there are, we can begin to advocate this concept, also within NATO.

Another key speaker was Alexander Kmentt, who is the Director of the Disarmament, Arms Control and Nonproliferation Department at the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He talked (online) about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and the prospects of nuclear disarmament in the current world situation.

There was also a workshop led by one of the IPPNW co-presidents Carlos Umaña about how to influence decision makers and politicians. We were given good tips and discussions were fruitful. Another theme was 'cities are not targets' with ideas to promote ICAN's Cities Appeal.¹

There were also several medical students from many countries, not only from Germany. They participated in all the main sessions, and also had their own program.

At the end of the conference the participants organized a demonstration at Hamburg City Hall Square against nuclear weapons. This was also mentioned in the local media.

For me this meeting was not only about getting more information and sharing experiences, but also a great joy. It was lovely to meet face-to-face so many old friends with whom I have been working in IPPNW for decades. And to see there are many young doctors and students continuing this important work. I was also glad I was able to avoid flying. A boat from Finland and a train from Stockholm is a quite feasible way to travel.

Note

1. ICAN Cities Appeal – Full list (icanw.org).