

Feminist Peace for the Arctic: A Briefing on the Fourth Eurasian Women's Forum, the BRICS Women's Meeting, and the "Peace, Nature and Cooperation in the Baltic and Arctic Seas" Conference in St. Petersburg, Russia in September 2024.

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In September 2024, three significant events took place in St. Petersburg, Russia that brought women from around the world together to discuss ways to build peace and cooperation in the Arctic and in other regions in these difficult, turbulent times. The events represented cross-cultural and transnational feminism in action.

The Fourth Eurasian Women's Forum

From September 18 to 20, the Fourth Eurasian Women's Forum (EWF) was held at the historic Tauride Palace, also known as the Tavrichesky Palace. The EWF was co-organized by the Interparliamentary Assembly of Member Nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. The Palace currently serves as the headquarters of the CIS Interparliamentary Assembly. The forum's purpose was to bring women together to collaborate for peace, sustainability, and development.

Approximately 2,000 women from around the world attended the three-day forum. Delegates included foreign ministers, senior government officials, and academic, corporate, and civil society leaders from 126 countries, including South Africa, Tanzania, Pakistan, China, Malaysia, Afghanistan, Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Finland, and France. There were also many Indigenous women from across Russia's Arctic and sub-Arctic regions, including representatives from the Chukchi and Sakha peoples. Many delegates wore their country's traditional dress, making the event colourful and vibrant. I attended as a representative of the Canadian Voice of Women for Peace (VOW) and the Women's International League for Peace

and Freedom (WILPF) Canada, two national feminist organizations committed to peace, disarmament, and gender equality.



Figure 1: Fourth Eurasian Women's Forum, St. Petersburg, Russia, September 2024.

The first EWF was held in 2015 and has taken place every three years. The theme of the 2024 forum was “Women Strengthening Trust and Global Cooperation.” The Chairwoman of the Russian Federation Council, Valentina Matviyenko, opened the forum with welcoming remarks in the Palace’s Duma Hall. Matviyenko encouraged women to unite to create a better, more just, and equitable world. She asserted that “the era of domination of the ‘golden billion’ is leaving us” and expressed optimism for multipolarity. The Secretary-General of UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Rebeca Grynspan,

explained that “Eurasia, a continental bridge between Europe and Asia, is a crucible of cultures, histories and aspirations. It is a region where languages intertwine, traditions intermingle, and ideas intersect.” She appealed to delegates not to fragment but to forge partnerships with other women worldwide.

During the morning plenary, top-ranking officials from different countries presented on the need for greater women’s leadership to achieve equality, protect the environment and climate, and develop sustainably. Many delegates appealed for an end to all war and armed conflict.

On the afternoon of the first day, Russian President Vladimir Putin gave a keynote address. He declared that “Humanity is in need of a robust foundation of trust, openness, mutual understanding, and contacts across various fields to address challenging social issues, ensure economic prosperity and technological development, and overcome poverty, inequality, and diseases.” President Putin added, “Most importantly, to be able to develop equitably, every country needs the indivisibility of security principles.” He explained that women play an essential role in bringing about the positive changes needed in global affairs. Putin also discussed Russia’s National Strategy of Action in the Interests of Women 2023-2030, which outlines new initiatives to improve gender equity and women’s rights across the country.

The EWF schedule was a packed program of over one hundred sessions on topics ranging from social and human welfare, healthcare and well-being, entrepreneurship and economic development, digitalization and technology, culture and tourism, human rights and multilateralism, to environmental protection and climate change. The EWF also included an incredible cultural program with musical and dance performances and an exhibition on Russia’s Indigenous



Figure 2: Fourth Eurasian Women's Forum with members of Women for Peace Finland, September 2024.

communities. The forum showcased a variety of products made by women-led businesses, with many sessions focusing on women and the Arctic, oceans, and climate change.

On the second day, a morning panel entitled “Women’s Initiatives Driving the Development of the Green Economy” was held. One speaker, a government official from Beijing, shared the remarkable rise of renewable energy technologies in China. Another speaker, an oncologist from Serbia, discussed the NATO bombing with depleted uranium munitions that devastated her country in 1999 and caused long-lasting harm to the environment and public health. She described how NATO bombed Serbia for 78 days with 20,000 bombs, an intervention that eventually led to the break-up of Yugoslavia. The doctor called for accountability and a public inquiry into the impacts of NATO’s intervention and emphasized that war and militarism impede the transition to a green economy.



Figure 3: Fourth Eurasian Women's Forum, “Women’s Initiatives Driving the Development of the Green Economy” Panel, September 2024.

In the afternoon, a roundtable on “Cooperation in the Interests of the Arctic” featured several panellists, including a member of the Russian Coast Guard, an Inuit woman, and a Japanese academic, who talked about cross-cultural cooperation and scientific research in the Arctic.

At the roundtable, another Russian woman spoke about the progress in the major clean-up of the Arctic, launched by the Russian government in 2010. She explained that the Russian Geographical Society and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment have been leading initiatives to remediate environmental pollution from the Soviet era across the region. Over the past fifteen years, volunteers from Russia and worldwide have worked in the Arctic to collect and remove scrap metal, military debris, remnants of fuel and lubricants, and other waste. The session also shared information on the Russian government’s conservation measures to protect endangered species and expand the Russian Arctic National Park.

As part of the roundtable, I spoke about VOW’s and WILPF-Canada’s concerns that the Canadian government is militarizing the Arctic with the United States through the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and NATO. I explained that Canada is investing \$38.6 billion in NORAD modernization, which will lead to more fossil fuel-powered warplanes and warships in the Arctic, one of the fastest-warming regions on the planet. Canadian women’s groups worry that this militarization will harm Indigenous communities, degrade the environment, exacerbate climate change, and foment geopolitical conflict. I argued that Arctic countries should revitalize the Arctic Council and support the Inuit Circumpolar Council’s appeal for the region to be a zone of peace and cooperation, free from nuclear weapons.

The BRICS Women’s Meeting

On the third and final day of the EWF, a special strategic session entitled “The Future of BRICS: Prospects for Cooperation” was held. In the large auditorium, a box containing a lovely BRICS

scarf was placed on every seat for each delegate. The opening panel of the BRICS Women's Meeting featured women leaders from Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, and North Korea. They highlighted women's crucial role in economic development and called for advancing women's social and economic equality. The speaker from India also gave an impassioned speech urging BRICS to establish indicators to evaluate progress on implementing women's equality programs in member states.

The BRICS Women's Meeting was held on the sidelines of the EWF as part of Russia's presidency of BRICS that year. Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Ryabkov discussed the Russian presidency's priorities for the multilateral organization, which included: politics and security; economics and finance; and human rights and development. Ryabkov explained that advancing women's equality, empowerment, and entrepreneurship were integral to each priority. Among the women at the EWF, BRICS is seen as a hopeful initiative for the development of their countries and for fairness in the international system.



Figure 4: BRICS Women's Meeting, St. Petersburg, Russia, September 2024.

In the EWF's closing plenary, officials from several countries gave impassioned and inspiring speeches. The diplomat from Indonesia said that countries need to “lead with love and leave no one behind.” Representatives of Cuba and Bosnia and Herzegovina called for an end to illegal Western sanctions and economic injustice in the global economy. Many women leaders also appealed for greater cooperation and action to avert the climate crisis and alleviate poverty. A final Forum declaration was released, affirming the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

The “Peace, Nature and Cooperation in the Baltic and Arctic Regions” Conference

The “Peace, Nature and Cooperation in the Baltic and Arctic Regions” Conference was also held in St. Petersburg from September 21 to 22, coinciding with the annual International Day of Peace. There were approximately 100 participants in-person and online from across Russia, Europe, and North America. The conference was organized and endorsed by the Public Council of the Southern Coast of the Gulf of Finland, the International Peace Bureau, VOW, WILPF-Canada, World BEYOND War, and Global Women for Peace United Against NATO (GWUAN), among other groups. The participants were civil society activists and academics who discussed their concerns about the adverse social, climate, and environmental impacts of the increased militarization of the Arctic and Baltic Seas. Participants also discussed ways to cooperate on joint projects and build peace.



Figure 5: Peace, Nature and Cooperation in the Baltic and Arctic Regions Conference, St. Petersburg, Russia, Sept. 2024

One key organizer was Oleg Bodrov, a retired Russian engineer-physicist, long-time environmentalist, and chairman of the Public Council of the South Coast of the Gulf of Finland. In his remarks, Bodrov discussed how the Arctic and Baltic Seas are our common natural heritage and must be protected for future generations. Lea Launokari and Ulla Klotzer of Women for Peace Finland, who were also co-organizers, spoke about the possibilities for improving relations between Finland and Russia, noting the many economic, cultural, and familial ties between the two countries. They also presented on the continued environmental damage from munitions and unexploded

ordnance dumped in the Baltic Sea during the Second World War. Conference participants discussed the urgent need to clean up the Arctic and Baltic Seas, which are critical ecosystems that provide water, fish, and other resources to bordering countries. They also called for the Arctic and Baltic Seas to be demilitarized and designated zones of peace to facilitate and fund remediation efforts.

Participants also discussed Russia's foreign policy concept, released the previous year. On the Arctic, The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation called for "peacefully resolving international issues related to the Arctic, proceeding from the premise of the special responsibility of the Arctic states for the sustainable development of the region and the sufficiency of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) for regulating interstate relations in the Arctic Ocean." Under UNCLOS, state parties, including Canada and Russia, have a legal commitment to maintain peace and security, promote international cooperation, and mutual understanding in the seas and oceans.

The conference ended with the drafting of the St. Petersburg Declaration, based on the principles of the UN Charter and the spirit of UNCLOS and the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. One article of the Declaration stated: "We believe in the indivisibility of security, which means that no one is secure until everyone is secure. Peace is achieved by diplomacy, cooperation, cross-border activities, active involvement of the diaspora and a feminist agenda counting on protection, meaningful participation and prevention in all phases of conflict." The declaration was translated into several languages and received widespread support from civil society organizations. It was sent to governments in the Baltic and Arctic regions, the UN, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Arctic Council, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, and the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (also known as the Helsinki Commission - HELCOM).

Mobilization for Feminist Peace and Cooperation in the Arctic

The EWF, the BRICS Women's Meeting, and the "Peace, Nature and Cooperation in the Baltic and Arctic Regions" Conference exemplified women's leadership in international peacebuilding

and feminist diplomacy. These important events demonstrated how women are mobilizing for peace and cooperation in the Arctic and among all countries.

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