

THE FAILURE OF ECUMENISM IN THE FACE OF THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

KORINNA ZAMFIR¹

Abstract. The churches and ecumenical organisations have largely failed in their response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While the Russian Orthodox Church [ROC] openly legitimised the aggression, most churches hesitated to condemn it or severe ties, prioritising ecumenical diplomacy. This reluctance stems from naïve assumptions about the ROC, overconfidence in dialogue, and the overlap of ecclesial and political interests. This study examines the support of the ROC for the war and its ecumenical consequences, the response of the Catholic Church, and of the major ecumenical bodies (notably the WCC), arguing that during a war of aggression, placing ecumenical relations above truth, justice, and solidarity with the victim falls under the notion of “false irenicism” (UR 11), benefits the aggressor, weakens the pursuit of peace, and damages the credibility of the Churches. The old paradigms of ecumenical relations and ecclesial diplomacy – the Ostpolitik, neutrality, the myth of dialogue –, as well as pacifism at all costs, need to be revised.

Keywords. Russian invasion of Ukraine, ecumenical relations, Russian Orthodox Church, Ukraine, Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Catholic Church, World Council of Churches, Unitatis reintegratio, Charta Oecumenica, pacifism, just war

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has put ecumenical relations at a test. With very few exceptions, the response of the churches and ecumenical bodies was inadequate. While the Russian Orthodox Church [ROC] has consistently legitimised the war of aggression against Ukraine, most churches were unwilling to condemn its position, let alone sever ties with it, prioritising ecumenical relations over a clear stance on the war. The reluctance to break with a church that represents and supports the aggressor state stems partly from a naïve misapprehension regarding the nature

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and intentions of the ROC doubled by overconfidence in dialogue and diplomacy as instruments of conflict resolution, but it also results from the entanglement of ecclesial and political considerations.

This paper addresses the failure of ecumenical relations in the context of the war. I firstly evoke the support of the ROC for the war against Ukraine and the way this has affected ecumenical relations. I then turn to the response of the Catholic Church and of the ecumenical institutions to the war. I argue that under the circumstances of a war of aggression, prioritising ecumenical relations and diplomatic steps at the cost of truth, justice and solidarity with the victim favours the aggressor, does not advance the cause of peace, and undermines the credibility of the churches and ecclesial organisations that take this path. The Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* has warned against “false irenicism” as an attitude thoroughly foreign to the spirit of ecumenism (UR 11). This warning should apply not only to theological dialogue but to ecumenical relations in general.

The role of the Russian Orthodox Church in legitimising the war against Ukraine

The ROC fully sustains the war of aggression against Ukraine. Its ideological discourse, – a manifestation of political religion –, uses religious concepts and symbols to justify a political goal, the occupation of Ukraine and the achievement of Russian neo-imperialistic ambitions. To that aim, two ideological concepts are blended in political and religious discourse: the *russskiy mir* and the Holy Rus.

The *russskiy mir*, a central concept in Russian political discourse and geopolitical strategy, has become the quintessence of post-Soviet imperialistic ideas.² More

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- 2 On the concept, its meaning and evolution: Cyril HOVORUN, “Interpreting the ‘Russian World’”, in Andrii KRAWCHUK and Thomas BREMER (eds.), *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 163–172; Pavlo SMYTSNYUK, “The War in Ukraine as a Challenge for Religious Communities: Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Prospects for Peacemaking,” *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 1 (2023) 26–70 (30–35); Marlene LARUELLE, “The ‘Russian World’. Russia’s Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination”, *Center for Global Interests Papers* (2015) 1–28; Oleksiy BONDARENKO, “Russkij Mir’, Between Diaspora and Public Diplomacy. Russia’s Foothold in Central Asia”, *Il Politico* 81.3 (2016) 87–106; Thomas BREMER, “Diffuses Konzept. Die Russische Orthodoxe Kirche und die ‘Russische Welt’”, *Osteuropa* 66.3 (2016) 3–18; Alexander MEIENBERGER, The Concept of the “Russkiy Mir”: History of the Concept and Ukraine, *Euxeinos* 13.35 (2023)

than a linguistic-cultural community and a geopolitical marketing brand, the concept of the 'Russian world' has come to be defined as a civilisational space standing up to the decadent, satanic West, defending 'traditional values'.³ Politically, it was used for legitimising the subjugation of neighbouring countries, based on the argument that the West was contriving to destroy the unity of the Russian civilisational space.⁴ In the imaginary of the *russskiy mir*, Ukrainians and Belarusians are fraternal people belonging to the Russian nation. These nations are thus denied their national identity, language, and culture (dismissed as inferior manifestations of Russian language and culture).⁵ Russia questions thereby these nations' right to self-determination and even their statehood (notably that of Ukraine).⁶ In the name of a claimed moral superiority, Russia feels entitled to exercise punitive 'correction' on its neighbours that have allegedly fallen to the corrupting influence of the West, by means of political control and the use of military power.⁷ The idea of the endangered 'Russian world' has served as ideological foundation for the war against Ukraine since 2014, and especially since the full-scale invasion in 2022, legitimising military occupation and genocidal warfare. The ROC plays a significant role in this process.⁸

15–29; Anatolii BABYNSKYI, "Resentment, Ideology and Myth: How "Holy Rus" Haunts the Russian Soul, in Yury P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURIY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine*, Ukrainian Catholic University Press, Lviv, 2024, 58–83; Tatiana VAGRAMENKO, FRANCISCO ARQUEROS FERNÁNDEZ, "La guerra santa del Russskiy mir. Religión y guerra en Ucrania", *Política y sociedad* 60.3 (2023) 1–14 (3–4), <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/poso.84415>.

- 3 HOVORUN, "Interpreting", 167–169; SMYTSNYUK, "War", 30–31, MEIENBERGER, "Concept", 21.
- 4 HOVORUN, Interpreting, 164; SMYTSNYUK, "War", 31–32. These 'traditional values' are limited to sexual ethics. Kirill has repeatedly referred to homosexuality and gay pride marches as signs of the West's depravity, which, he claimed, has poisoned Ukraine. Homily of Patriarch Kirill on Forgiveness Sunday in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (6.03.2022): Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю сыропустную после Литургии в Храме Христа Спасителя, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html>, also SMYTSNYUK, "War", 33.
- 5 The ideological foundation is contradictory, but effective, as it appeals to different groups: there is no Ukrainian language and identity, but Ukraine pushes for the "forced Ukrainisation" of the Russian population. BABYNSKYI, "Resentment", 61–62.
- 6 LARUELLE, "Russian World", 1.
- 7 HOVORUN, "Interpreting", 164–167; BONDARENKO, "Russkij Mir", 88.
- 8 Viorel COMAN, "Critical Analysis of the Moscow Patriarchate Vision on the Russian-Ukrainian Military Conflict: Russskiy Mir and Just War", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 76.4

Given its use in the war against Ukraine, in religious discourse, the ideology of the Russian world has been condemned in March 2022, in an important declaration issued by Orthodox theologians.⁹

In the discourse of the ROC, the *russskiy mir* has been superimposed on the older concept of the Holy Rus, – a manifestation of the Kingdom of God in the Eurasian region, a sort of metaphysical essence of the Russian people, allegedly born from the ‘Kievan baptismal font’ – an ideological reference to the baptism of Kyivan Prince Voldemar (Volodymyr, Vladimir). The Holy Rus is an expression of exceptionalism. Thus, Russia is said to be a Christian Orthodox civilisation with a unique destiny, meant to save the world from moral decay and destruction, by holding back the Evil brought about by the West.¹⁰

In what follows, I look at the intertwining of these two concepts in the homilies of Patriarch Kirill and in the Decree of the World Russian People’s Council (2024).

The ROC, in particular Patriarch Kirill has had a major role in providing ideological-religious legitimisation to Russia’s war against Ukraine, starting with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014. Kirill has from the beginning combined the two ideological constructs, the *russskiy mir* and the Holy Rus,¹¹ to portray Russia’s war as defence of the Orthodox civilisational space and of traditional values against the hostile, decadent West, conniving to break the unity of the Russian people born from the ‘Kievan baptismal font’. The narrative not only legitimised Russian invasion but provided the war with a religious dimension.¹²

(2023) 332–344; Paul L. GAVRILYUK, “When the Patriarch of Moscow Blesses a War: The Russian World and the Sacralization of Violence”, *Modern Theology* (2024), DOI:10.1111/moth.12970.

- 9 Brandon GALLAHER, Pantelis KALAITZIDIS, and the Drafting Committee, “A Declaration on the ‘Russian World’ (Russkii Mir) Teaching”, *Mission Studies* 39 (2022) 269–276, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/03/13/a-declaration-on-the-russian-world-russkii-mir-teaching/>.
- 10 See Mikhail D. SUSLOV, “Holy Rus”: The Geopolitical Imagination in the Contemporary Russian Orthodox Church, *Russian Politics and Law* 52.3 (2014) 67–86 (68–71); ID., “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Crisis in Ukraine”, in Andrii KRAWCHUK, Thomas BREMER (eds.), *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 133–162 (138–140); BABYNSKYI, “Resentment”, 63–67.
- 11 BABYNSKYI, “Resentment”, 67, on Gundiayev’s claim that the Holy Rus is the core the Russian world.
- 12 See the speech following the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts on the 38th anniversary of his episcopal consecration (14.03.2014): <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/3606218>.

These topoi are also found in the discourse of Metropolitan Hilarion: the West bears the responsibility for the war (euphemistically, the sad events occurring within the Eastern Orthodox family), having sown the seeds of discord.¹³ The ROC defends the traditional values of marriage and family, protects human life from the moment of conception to natural death, fights against the loss of moral authority, the triumph of falsehood and injustice in contemporary society, while certain parts of the Western Christian world are sliding into the abyss of the total rejection of the Gospel and Christ, and follow the path of moral relativism. These claims were made in March 2022, as war raged in Ukraine and civilians in Bucha, Mariupol, Izium were tortured, starved, slaughtered and buried in mass graves.¹⁴

After the full-scale invasion, Kirill not only justified the Russian “military operation” on religious and moral grounds,¹⁵ but turned the war aiming at the destruction of Ukraine into a metaphysical war, in which the Russian army fights on the side of good, in defence of the Holy Rus, against the evil, satanic forces of darkness (the West and the government of Ukraine), against the destruction of Christian faith.¹⁶ In this eschatological combat, those who adhered to the divine commandments and Orthodoxy were fighting the forces of evil. Kirill assimilated

html. Strikingly, Kirill questions Ukrainian statehood and national identity (its territory is part of the Russian world, the Orthodox civilizational space, from which the enemies of the Russian homeland tried to tear it away; its population is referred to as ‘our faithful people’; a ‘fratricidal war’ must be avoided).” Also BREMER, *Diffuses Konzept*, 13–14.

13 On the occasion of the inter-Orthodox consultation in Cyprus: Metropolitan HILARION of Budapest and Hungary, “Reconciliation and Unity Are the Purpose of the Divine Love Incarnate in Jesus Christ”, in Ioan SAUCA – Vasile-Octavian MIHOC (eds.), *Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Karlsruhe. Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity*, Geneva: WCC, 2022, 52–59 (54). The language evokes the enemy in Matt 13,25.39, in Russian Orthodox discourse a personification of the Satanic West.

14 HILARION, “Reconciliation”, 55.

15 Vebjørn L. HORSFJORD, “Patriarch and Patriot: History in Patriarch Kirill’s Sermons in the First Year of the Full-scale War in Ukraine”, *Religion, State and Society* 52.4 (2024) 367–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2353417>.

16 Homily in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, 27 February, 2022: His Holiness Patriarch Kirill Calls on the Faithful to Pray for Peace and Unity of the Church, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5904398.html>. Some days later, on March 6, while the Russian army invaded and was bombing Ukraine, and the civilian population was fleeing, the patriarch spoke of the preparation for Easter as a time of spiritual spring and rebirth, attributing the war to the plotting of hostile external forces and to sins against divine commandments, especially

the fight of the Holy Rus in defence of national and Christian values to the cosmic struggle of Ephesians. The ‘military confrontation’ with hostile forces, Russians’ struggle was “not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6,12). In this struggle, Kirill claimed, Russia was on the side of light. Russia “does not want to conquer other countries, it does not want to subjugate anyone [!]. Russia simply seeks to preserve its identity, its beliefs, its values.”¹⁷

In Kirill’s interpretation celestial figures are militarised and turned into instruments of political religion. The Mother of God becomes the heavenly patron of the Russian soldiers fighting against Ukraine and a military commander. The festive presentation of the Avgústovskaya icon of the Mother of God to Viktor Zolotov, Commander-in-Chief of the Rosgvardiya on 13 March 2022, the day of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, and its subsequent transferral to the Church of St. Vladimir in Balashikha (near Moscow), is a striking example of the close cooperation between the ROC and the army, promoting military and political goals.¹⁸ The Patriarch was honouring thus the troops that took part in the massacre in Bucha in the early stages of the offensive against Ukraine.

The Archangel Michael is turned into an example for the soldiers as an *archistrategos* of God. Contrary to the common view that God is Love and that everything around him is pervaded by love, St Michael, the closest angel to God, Kirill argued, points to the struggle between good and evil. In this distorted

gay pride parades: Патриаршая проповедь в Неделю сыропустную после Литургии в Храме Христа Спасителя, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html>.

17 Homily on Palm Sunday, 2023. Россия стремится сохранить свою самобытность, свою веру, свою систему ценностей, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6017763.html>, see also SMYTSNYUK, “War”, 30.

18 Vyacheslav KARPOV, “The Theotokos as Commander in Chief: How Russian Orthodoxy Informs Imperialist Wars and is Twisted by Them”, in Yuri P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURİY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia’s Aggression Against Ukraine*, Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024, 84–117. Also <https://bigasia.ru/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/4c5de1eab6fa970589147d338add3f3b.jpg>. In some interpretations of the icon, the Mother of God not only extends her blessing, protective hand over the Russian army, but also points the way for the Russian offensive on the Western Front as a military commander.

narrative, in the metaphysical war, the Russian soldiers fighting against Ukraine are on the side of Good and can be assured of God's support.¹⁹

Political soteriology and the cult of the dead also find a place in Kirill's discourse. The death of Russian soldiers is not only self-sacrifice, but a sacrifice that washes away all their sins.²⁰ Perpetrators of violent crimes become thus Christ-like victims.²¹ Self-redemption renders Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the cross irrelevant. Moreover, this redemptive death is attributed to soldiers who fought a war of aggression, committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. This claim contradicts established Orthodox teaching about killing as a serious offence even in the case of self-defence.²²

One of the most aggressive attempts to legitimise the war against Ukraine with ideological and religious arguments is the resolution of the 25th World Russian People's Council, *The Present and Future of the Russian World*.²³ The document, approved at a session presided by Kirill, blends the ideology of the *russkiy mir* and Holy Rus, presenting the war against Ukraine (the "special military operation" [SMO]) as a war of liberation, a struggle for the survival and values of the Russian nation, against the criminal Kyiv regime and the collective West behind it, which, it claims, has been waged "on the territories of southwestern Rus" since 2014.

19 In his speech at the Church of St. Luke in the A.A. Vishnevsky Central Military Clinical Hospital (Novy, Krasnogorsk) (21.06.2022), <https://www.patriarchia.ru/article/77388>.

20 Патриарх Кирилл произнёс особую молитву о русских воинах и победе Святой Руси, *Народный Собор* (26.09.2022), <https://narodsobor.ru/2022/09/26/patriarh-kirill-proiznyos-osobuyu-molitvu-o-russkih-voinah-i-pobede-svyatoj-rusi/>. Also, VOLKOVA, "Theological Foundation", 123.

21 VOLKOVA, "Theological Foundation", 128–129.

22 On the departure from Orthodox doctrine: COMAN, "Critical Analysis", 340–343. See further Christos KARAKOLIS, "Nonviolence in the New Testament: An Orthodox-Hermeneutical Perspective", *Sacra Scripta* 19.1–2 (2021) 76–91.

23 Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора «Настоящее и будущее Русского мира», <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html>; Order of the XXV World Russian People's Council "Present and Future of the Russian World", https://risu.ua/en/order-of-the-xxv-world-russian-peoples-council-present-and-future-of-the-russian-world_n147334. The document was issued at the session of November 27–28, 2023, and was approved on March 27, 2024, at the session presided by Patriarch Kirill, held at the Hall of Church Councils of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The circumstances and the composition of the WRPC and the religious discourse indicate that the decree expresses the position of the ROC.

Thoroughly distorting reality, it claims that the Russian people are “defending with arms their life, freedom, statehood, civilizational, religious, national, and cultural identity, and their right to live on their own land within the borders of the unified Russian state.” (The falsehood and cynicism of this claim are astonishing.) The declaration openly states that, from a spiritual and moral viewpoint, the SMO is a “holy war” in which Russia “defends the unified spiritual space of Holy Rus” and thereby fulfils the role of the Restrainer. This evokes the κατέχων, the mysterious figure of 2 Thess 2 who holds back the appearance of the Lawless One empowered by Satan, delaying the day of judgment.²⁴ Russia fulfils this role by protecting “the world from the assaults of globalism and from the victory of the West, which has sunk into Satanism.”

The apocalyptic scenario has a clear political aim: after the SMO the entire territory of Ukraine must fall under Russia’s exclusive sphere of influence, and the possibility of an anti-Russian political system must be removed. The document elaborates on the nature and mission of the ‘Russian world’ as a spiritual and cultural-civilizational space that transcends the borders of the RF and historical Russia; it is a “Russian ecumene” comprising the Eastern Slavs, the descendants of historical Rus. The historical-moral-eschatological mission of the Russian world is to save the world by restraining evil and to destroy all political attempts to establish universal hegemony, the subordination of humanity to a single evil principle.

The Catholic Church, Ecumenism and the War

In the decades following Vatican II, in the spirit of the Decree on ecumenism, the Catholic Church joined international ecumenical dialogue. Rome has had a long-standing appreciation for Orthodoxy and Orthodox theology.²⁵ The Decree

24 The use of the figure of the Restrainer in Russian discourse is not new: David G. LEWIS, *Russia’s New Authoritarianism. Putin and the Politics of Order*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 193–214 (Apocalypse Delayed: Katechontic Thinking in Late Putinist Russia); Cyril HOVORUN, “Deus ex Machina of the War in Ukraine”, *RES* 15.3 (2023) 297–322 (301–302).

25 Pope Benedict XV established the Sacred Congregation for the Eastern Church as an independent congregation (*Dei Providentis*, 1917, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/orientchurch/profilo/rc_con_corient_pro_20030320_profile.html), and founded the Pontifical Oriental Institute (*Orientis Catholici*, 1917, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/it/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xv_motu-proprio_19171015_

on Ecumenism expressed high regard for Orthodox tradition, theology, liturgy and spirituality and recognised the particular governance and discipline of the Eastern Churches (UR 14–18). In the aftermath of the Council, the Vatican has taken a great interest in the dialogue with the Orthodox Church,²⁶ playing an important role in the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue.²⁷

The Ecumenical Patriarchate proved to be a sincere partner of dialogue. Starting with the historic encounter between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem in 1964, relations continued to improve and meetings at the highest level multiplied. John Paul II visited Patriarch Demetrios shortly after his inauguration (1979) and Bartholomew visited Rome in 1995, with several joint events following (2002–2004). Benedict XVI visited Patriarch Bartholomew early on in his papacy (2006). In a first, Bartholomew attended the inaugural mass of Pope Francis (2013) and cordial relations developed between the two, materialised in several other encounters. The ecumenical patriarch was also present at the inaugural mass of

orientis-catholici.html); Edward G. FARRUGIA, “Benedict XV and the Founding of the Pontifical Oriental Institute (1917): Foresight, Intuition, Hindsight”, in *Benedict XV: A Pope in the World of the ‘Useless Slaughter’ (1914–1918)*, edited by Alberto MELLONI, Giovanni CAVAGNINI and Giulia GROSSI, Turnhout: Brepols, 2020, 1581–1598, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.STR-EB.5.118849>. See also: Pontifical Oriental Institute, A Brief History, <https://orientale.it/en/about/history>, for further pontifical decisions strengthening the Institute by Pius XI, and Alessandro DI BUSSOLO, “Dicastery for the Eastern Churches”, *Vatican News* (19.08.2025), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2025-08/dicastery-for-the-eastern-churches.html>, for an overview of its history up to the present.

26 On the beginnings of the rapprochement: John CHRYSAVGIS (ed.), *Dialogue of Love: Breaking the Silence of Centuries*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2014; for an overview of a number of issues in the postconciliar dialogue (with a focus on the problem of uniatism): Peter DE MEY, Jaroslav Z. SKIRA, Herman G. B. TEULE (eds.), *The Catholic Church and its Orthodox Sister Churches Twenty-five Years after Balamand* (BETL 326), Leuven: Peeters, 2022.

27 Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church (as a whole), <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-di-tradizione-bizantina/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la.html>; for the US: John BORELLI and John H. ERICKSON (eds.), *The Quest for Unity: Orthodox and Catholics in Dialogue: Documents of the Joint International Commission and Official Dialogues in the United States, 1965–1995*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press / Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996.

Pope Leo XIV and the two met in Iznik for a commemoration of the Council of Nicaea (2025).

The relationship with the ROC was of particular interest for the Vatican, but proved very difficult, given the reluctance of the ROC to establish contacts with Rome. Alexei II did not invite Pope John Paul II to Moscow.²⁸ In spite of Rome's hopes for a détente with the arrival of Kirill (2009),²⁹ Pope Benedict was not welcome either. Pope Francis was determined to meet Kirill. An encounter of the two eventually took place, but not in Moscow (or Rome), but in Havana (2016), notwithstanding the difficult political context following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. The withdrawal of the ROC from all ecumenical dialogues in which the Ecumenical Patriarchate was involved, in the aftermath of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine [OCU] being granted the autocephaly,³⁰ also created problems for the Catholic Church. Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022) further complicated the situation but did not deter Francis from his readiness to visit Moscow. It came as a relief for Ukraine and for the international community scandalised by Kirill's support for the war that Francis eventually cancelled a planned meeting with Kirill in Jerusalem in June 2022. While no pope could so far visit Moscow, the ROC established relations with the Vatican at a lower level. Metropolitan Hilarion of Vokolamsk visited Pope Benedict on several occasions (2009, 2011, 2012), and the apparent common ground was the need to defend traditional values and condemn the persecution of Christians in the Middle East. Pope Francis met Hilarion more than a dozen times between 2013–2023. Over the last meetings, Hilarion raised with Francis the issue of the alleged persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church [UOC]. Most recently, Pope Leo XIV received Hilarion's successor, Metropolitan Anthony of Vokolamsk in July 2025 and the latter repeated the claim about the persecution of the UOC.³¹

28 "Patriarch Alexy II and dialogue", The Free Library (2004): Catholic Insight <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Patriarch+Alexy+II+and+dialogue.-a0126313733>.

29 Victor L. SIMPSON, "Vatican: Papal Trip to Moscow a Possibility due to Improved Relations with Russian Orthodox", *The Canadian Press* (17 September 2009).

30 Cyril HOVORUN, "The Issue of *Unia* in Relations between Moscow and Constantinople", in Peter DE MEY, Jaroslav Z. SKIRA, Herman G. B. TEULE (eds.), *The Catholic Church and its Orthodox Sister Churches Twenty-five Years after Balamand* (BETL 326), Leuven: Peeters, 2022, 119–129 (123–125).

31 Gina CHRISTIAN, "Pope Leo Meets with Top Russian Orthodox Cleric amid War, Strained Relations", *Catholic Standard* (29.07.2025), <https://www.cathstan.org/us-world/pope-leo-meets-with-top-russian-orthodox-cleric-amid-war-strained-relations>.

This brief overview shows the high importance Rome assigns to the relationship with the ROC and sheds some light on one of the reasons for which, as we shall see, the Vatican failed to appropriately react to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, while Moscow was reluctant to permit a visit of a pope, under Kirill it has fostered a lower echelon but all the more influential representation in Vatican, to promote Russian ecclesial and political talking points.

The legacy of Pope Francis regarding the war in Ukraine is ambivalent, as are its ecumenical implications. On the one hand, Francis repeatedly expressed his solidarity with Ukraine, voiced sincere empathy with the victims and constantly called for prayer for the martyred people of Ukraine. He tasked Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, prefect of the Dicastery for the Service of Charity, with humanitarian missions, which materialised in ten visits to Ukraine up to April 2025.³² The Pope rejected Kirill's attempt to legitimise the war and warned him against becoming "Putin's altar-boy".³³ On the other hand, some well-intended gestures, like the 2022 Good Friday Way of the Cross in Rome³⁴ and the dedication of both Russia and Ukraine to the Mother of God were unfortunate, as they did not distinguish between aggressor and victim, between the suffering of Ukrainians – the military defending their country and their families and the innocent civilians –, and that of the Russian military waging a war of aggression and inflicting terror on the occupied territories. Furthermore, several of Francis's statements reflected his bias for Russia. His claim that the war was provoked by NATO barking at the door of Russia, his exoneration of ethnic Russians for the war crimes committed in Ukraine by assigning them to other ethnic groups of the RF,³⁵ his praise of the "great Russia" of imperial rulers like Peter I and Catherine II, known for their military expansionism, reflected Russian talking points as well as Francis's personal

32 Paulina GUZIK, "Despite Fear in Ukraine, Keep Going, Pope Tells Cardinal Krajewski", *OSV News* (2024), <https://www.osvnews.com/despite-fear-in-ukraine-keep-going-pope-tells-cardinal-krajewski/>. A summary of these missions can be found here: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/tags/7510/cardinal-konrad-krajewski>

33 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/the-pope-i-am-ready-to-meet-putin-in-moscow.html>, <https://www.axios.com/2022/05/05/pope-russian-orthodox-putin-altar-boy>.

34 Thomas Mark NÉMETH, "The War Against Ukraine and the Churches: A Challenge to Theology," in Yury P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURIY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine*, Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024, 250–256.

35 SMYTSNYUK, "War", 45.

sympathy for (the oft-postulated) Russian greatness, a view avowedly linked to his formation.³⁶ The critique of the legal steps taken by Ukraine requiring the UOC-MP to sever ties with Moscow was also unfortunate; the Pope understood the legal provisions as an infringement of religious freedom, without an appropriate insight into the situation (the fact that many of its leaders and clerics failed to distance themselves from the aggressor state).³⁷

More importantly, the established principles of Vatican diplomacy – the idea that Rome should be a *super partes* mediator in political and military conflicts, the Ostpolitik shaped during the Cold War, and the appreciation for Orthodoxy, rooted in ecclesiology, have prevented Francis from naming and condemning the aggressor state.³⁸

The pacifism of Pope Francis, reflected in the departure from the concept of just war, also explains the difficulty with distinguishing between victim and aggressor and naming the latter.³⁹ Emphasising that respect for international law, in particular the UN Charter, and diplomatic solutions are crucial for preventing

36 Nicole WINFIELD, “Ukraine’s Catholic Bishops Tell Pope that his Praise for Russia’s Imperial Past ‘Pained’ Ukrainians”, *NCR* (6.09.2023), <https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/ukraines-catholic-bishops-tell-pope-his-praise-russias-imperial-past-pained>.

37 Cindy WOODEN, “Pope Criticises New Law of Ukrainian Parliament: ‘Churches shouldn’t be Touched’”, *The Catholic Weekly* (27.08.2024), <https://catholicweekly.com.au/pope-criticises-new-church-law-in-ukraine/>. On the legal aspects: Liudmyla FYLYPOVYCH, “Security Challenges for Ukrainian Orthodoxy during the Russian-Ukrainian War”, *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 2 (2024) 63–80; Oleg SUKHOV, “Russian-linked Church Faces Potential Ban in Ukraine as it Remains Reluctant to Officially Cut Ties with Moscow”, *Kyiv Independent* (13.08.2025); Alya SHANDRA, “The Ukrainian Orthodox Church Says it Left Moscow. Documents Say Otherwise”, *Euromaidan* (9.07.2025).

38 SMYTSNYUK, “War”, 45–49; ID., “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Holy See: 70 Years of Political Ecumenism”, <https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2024/03/28/the-russian-orthodox-church-and-the-holy-see/>; Thomas Mark NÉMETH, “Pope Francis and Russia’s War against Ukraine”, *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 1 (2023) 92–109.

39 Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship (2020), 256–262, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html. On the paradigm shift marked by the FT: Cezary KOŚCIELNIAK, “Unjust Interpretations of a Just War: The Catholic Church’s Approach to the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict”, in Yury P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURIY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia’s Aggression Against Ukraine*, Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024, 257–268 (referring to his position as

wars (FT 257) may have sounded convincing in 2020 (although the occupation of Crimea and the Donbas war questioned this optimism). However, following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by a country with a permanent seat in the UN Security Council, there remained no doubt that wars are not always preventable by negotiations and that international law can easily be broken. More importantly, Francis's critique of the notion of just war is based on its abuse (FT 258, "in recent decades, every single war has been ostensibly 'justified'"), and does not consider circumstances in which engaging in a war is without any doubt an act of self-defence.⁴⁰ The war against Ukraine made it clear that defensive military actions aimed at countering a war of aggression with explicit genocidal intentions fully meet the criteria of a just war.⁴¹

"neo-Casariolism" and a departure from that of John Paul II, who had a better understanding of the realities of the Soviet Union).

- 40 "The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of the possibility of legitimate defence by means of military force, which involves demonstrating that certain 'rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy' have been met. Yet it is easy to fall into an overly broad interpretation of this potential right. In this way, some would also wrongly justify even 'preventive' attacks or acts of war that can hardly avoid entailing 'evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated'" (FT 258).
- 41 For a more realistic perspective: Manfred SPIEKER, "Christliche Friedensethik und der Krieg in der Ukraine. Warum die Lehre vom gerechten Krieg nicht überholt ist", *Communio* 5 (2022) 557–569; id., "Gerechte Verteidigung, *Herder Korrespondenz* 6 (2022). Drawing on Thomas Aquinas, KOŚCIELNIAK, argues for the legitimacy and applicability of the concept of just war to Ukraine's defensive war ("Unjust Interpretations of a Just War", 257–268). The provisions of international law also justify Ukraine's right to self-defence. Heinz-Gerhard JUSTENHOVEN, "Russia's War Against Ukraine: A Peace-Ethical Analysis," in Yury P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURIY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine*, Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024, 193–220: Ukraine's self-defence meets the criteria of the UN Charter (art. 51). The alternative of civil activism or nonviolent resistance is untenable in view of the widespread abuse on civil-rights activists and the suppression of civilian resistance. Surrender would not be a lesser evil, considering the widespread violence against the population, the mass deportations, the abduction of children, the torture of civilians and POW, the destruction of the infrastructure, aiming at the destruction and russification of Ukraine. See also Andreas TRAMPOTA, "Just War vs. Just Peace? Ethics of War and Peace between the Realism of Christian Eschatology and Unrealistic Utopia," in the same volume, 237–249 (Just peace is a preventive doctrine; just peace and just war

The emphasis on negotiations materialised in a number of diplomatic steps taken by the Vatican, including the mission of Cardinal Matteo Zuppi to Moscow, to call for the return of the abducted Ukrainian children,⁴² and a telephone conversation of Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher with Sergey Lavrov.⁴³ These initiatives were no doubt well-intended. Apparently, the contacts between Rome and Moscow have contributed to the release of several groups of prisoners,⁴⁴ but did not enhance in any way the probability of a ceasefire and of peace negotiations. The meetings with Russian ecclesial and political authorities did certainly not change the mind of the aggressor state. Conversely, such visits and calls alleviate the international isolation of the RF and present Moscow as an important partner of discussion for the Catholic Church.

For decades, the MP has instrumentalised the ecumenical relations with the Catholic Church. In the sphere of ecclesial relations, it has used this dialogue to undermine the influence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, establishing itself as a recognised ecclesial leader within Orthodoxy and as an alleged defender of

are complementary concepts. Christian theology must reckon with the existence of evil in human history and confront it.)

- 42 During his visit to Moscow, Cardinal Zuppi met infamous politicians (Yuri Ushakov, Assistant to the President of the RF for Foreign Policy Affairs, Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Beleva), and Patriarch Kirill, without achieving any commitment regarding the return of Ukrainian children. Roberto PAGLIA LONGA – Deborah CASTELLANO LUBOV, "Cardinal Zuppi: We are Trying to Bring Ukrainian Children Home", *Vatican News* (5.07.2023), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-07/cardinal-zuppi-we-are-trying-to-bring-ukrainian-children-home.html>.
- 43 Telephone conversation between the Secretary for Relations with States and International Organizations and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 04.04.2025, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2025/04/04/250404f.html>. The conversation was "aimed at stopping the military actions" and the Holy See reiterated the "willingness to continue its humanitarian effort in matters regarding the exchange of prisoners". The communiqué does not mention any commitment that would have been made by the Russian side regarding these matters.
- 44 As argued by Anatolii BABYNSKYI, who notes nonetheless the instrumentalisation of the Catholic Church for propaganda purposes and Moscow's disregard for the word of the Pope: "A Theologian Explains Why the Pope is 'Making Reverences' towards Russia", *RISU* (04.05.2023), https://risu.ua/en/a-theologian-explains-why-the-pope-is-making-reverences-towards-russia_n139141.

traditional values. Furthermore, the MP has employed these discussions to promote Moscow's geopolitical agenda.⁴⁵

To avoid a conflict with the ROC, notwithstanding the very good relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Vatican has not recognised the OCU, representing millions of Orthodox Ukrainians.⁴⁶ It is also striking that the Havana declaration takes over the Russian position on the Donbas war, presented as an internal (irresponsible) conflict inflecting suffering on peaceful inhabitants, and voices the hope of overcoming the "schism between the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine".⁴⁷ Moreover, the relationships with the MP were also prioritised over the aspirations and interests of Greek-Catholics in Ukraine.⁴⁸

The compliance of the Vatican with the positions of the MP did not achieve the unity it had hoped. The MP has undermined the Catholic-Orthodox ecumenical dialogue, withdrawing all forums in which the Ecumenical Patriarchate had a leading role. Babynskyi shows how Rome has misread the intentions of the ROC, and has ignored its politicisation and political agenda, the lack of sincere interest in a theological dialogue based on mutual respect, truthfulness and willingness for transformation, and the deep anti-Western sentiment of the ROC. In addition, the view that the nationalistic tendencies of the ROC could be tamed by integration,

45 SMYTSNYUK, "The Russian Orthodox Church", <https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2024/03/28/the-russian-orthodox-church-and-the-holy-see/> (noting how the Havana meeting between Pope Francis and Kirill (2016) was used to counter the influence of the Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete and to make Russia's military intervention in Syria palatable); Anatolii BABYNSKYI, "The Price of 'Unity Above Truth': Vatican-Moscow Relations and the War Against Ukraine", *RISU* (16.10.2025), https://risu.ua/en/the-price-of-unity-above-truth-vatican-moscow-relations-and-the-war-against-ukraine_n159277.

46 SMYTSNYUK, "The Russian Orthodox Church", <https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2024/03/28/the-russian-orthodox-church-and-the-holy-see/>; BABYNSKYI, "The Price of 'Unity Above Truth'", https://risu.ua/en/the-price-of-unity-above-truth-vatican-moscow-relations-and-the-war-against-ukraine_n159277.

47 Havana 26–27, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/february/documents/papa-francesco_20160212_dichiarazione-comune-kirill.html. Also Ihor RANTSYA, "La Déclaration de La Havane de 2016 et son interprétation en Ukraine dans le contexte de la réception du document de Balamand", in Peter DE MEY, Jaroslav Z. SKIRA, Herman G. B. TEULE (eds.), *The Catholic Church and its Orthodox Sister Churches Twenty-five Years after Balamand* (BETL 326), Leuven: Peeters, 2022, 153–167 (156–160).

48 BABYNSKYI, "The Price of 'Unity Above Truth'", https://risu.ua/en/the-price-of-unity-above-truth-vatican-moscow-relations-and-the-war-against-ukraine_n159277.

theological and cultural exchanges and ecclesial contacts has proven to be just as misguided as the Western European efforts to transform Russia into a democracy through political and economic integration.⁴⁹

The path taken by Pope Leo seems ambiguous for the moment. On the one hand, in a 2022 interview, as bishop of Chiclayo, Robert Prevost was very clear about the nature of the war, the imperialistic intentions of the aggressor state, the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Russia, and the need to speak out about these matters.⁵⁰ As pope, he has repeatedly spoken with empathy about the suffering of Ukrainians, called for peace, and expressed the willingness of the Vatican to host peace talks. However, he has also emphasised the efforts of the Holy See to maintain neutrality and argued that “a number of different actors have to push hard enough to make the parties that are at war say, enough is enough, and let’s look for another way to solve our differences”.⁵¹ (The principle of remaining a *super partes* mediator was also obvious from the welcome of Metropolitan Anthony of Vokolamsk.⁵²) Speaking of the “useless killing after these years of people on both sides” because of which “people have to somehow be wakened up to say, there’s another way to do this” seems to continue equating the loss of the victim and of the aggressor, as well as the unwarranted optimism regarding the chances of dialogue. It seems thus that no major change should be expected in the position

49 BABYNSKYI, “The Price”, *ibid.*

50 Entrevista al obispo de Chiclayo, monseñor Robert Prevost, *Semanario Expresión* (Apr 13, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/live/dQ3Y2CgPgl4>, from min. 9.05. For an English translation: “The Words of Robert Prevost, the New Pope Leo XIV, on the Invasion of Ukraine” (5.11.2025), <https://www.outono.net/elentir/2025/05/11/the-words-of-robert-prevost-the-new-pope-leo-xiv-on-the-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

51 Charles COLLINS, “Pope Leo says NATO ‘has not started’ conflict with Russia”, *Crux* (2025.09.17), <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2025/09/pope-leo-says-nato-has-not-started-conflict-with-russia>.

52 CHRISTIAN, “Pope Leo”, <https://www.cathstan.org/us-world/pope-leo-meets-with-top-russian-orthodox-cleric-amid-war-strained-relations>. If the communiqué of the ROC cited here is to be trusted, Leo “expressed gratitude” to Patriarch Kirill and “noted the importance of developing relations with the Russian Orthodox Church.” For Cyril HOVORUN’s assessment of Pope Leo’s meeting with Anthony of Vokolamsk and his position: Комментарий для Вот Так о встрече митрополита Антония Севрюка и папы Льва XIV (July 27, 2025), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcK6767OHX8> (automatic translation can be enabled).

of the Vatican. Moscow on the other hand refused the Vatican's offer to act as a mediator of peace negotiations. (Ukraine appears to count on a mediation for the sake of returning abducted children and prisoners of war.⁵³)

The World Council of Churches and the Invasion of Ukraine

The WCC's response to the Russian aggression, from the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas to the full-scale invasion, has been feeble and flawed. After an early, appropriate reaction, most of the official statements failed to adequately distinguish between victim and perpetrator, to name the aggressor state and condemn the church supporting it. To this day, despite the scandalous statements of its hierarchy, the ROC remains a full member of the WCC and is held in the highest regard.

In the first weeks of the war, several statements were made, and public letters were exchanged. The reaction of the WCC was very prompt. Acting general secretary Ioan Sauca spoke out twice, already before the full-scale invasion (on January 25 and February 22), hoping that the war could be prevented.⁵⁴ On the day of the invasion, the WCC denounced the "use of deadly armed force to resolve disputes that could be resolved by dialogue", called for the protection of human life, an end to armed hostilities, respect for international law and borders, and dialogue.⁵⁵ On March 11, the WCC condemned the attack on the maternity hospital in Mariupol and on numerous civilian facilities (hospitals, kindergartens, schools, apartment

53 "Ukraine Delegation Meets Pope Leo to Discuss Children Held in Russia", *WaPo* (November 21, 2025), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/11/21/pope-leo-ukraine-russia-children/>.

54 January 25: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-ukraine>; February 22: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-statement-on-ukraine>.

The WCC and its member churches urge peace for the people of Ukraine. Instead of geopolitical rivalry, the parties should consider the suffering war brought to children, women, and men. Prayers should be made for de-escalation and dialogue, all the more as members of the people of God are found on both sides of the confrontation. The February statement calls for respect for international law and borders, and for a return to the principles of the Minsk agreements. The latter request is naïve and harmful for Ukraine, because these did not prevent the invasion but only prepared the ground for the full-scale war.

55 <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-calls-for-an-immediate-end-to-the-current-armed-hostilities>.

buildings), the bombing of towns and villages, the violation of humanitarian law, and the attacks on civilians, which amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity. It called for the protection of human dignity, a ceasefire, and the resolution of the conflict through negotiations.⁵⁶ These appeals did not change the determination of the aggressor state but were clear and correct.

Sauca's letter of March 2 to Patriarch Kirill was also sincere and fair. He pointed to the tragic situation in Ukraine caused by the war, the immense suffering, the loss of human life, and the flight of civilians fearing for their lives. As acting general secretary and as an Orthodox priest, he asked the patriarch to raise his voice on behalf of the suffering brothers and sisters, the majority of whom belonged to the Orthodox Church. He urged him to intercede with the authorities to stop the war, the bloodshed, and the suffering, and to make efforts for peace through dialogue and negotiations.⁵⁷ Kirill's response was cynical.⁵⁸ He claimed that Sauca's intercession would violate WCC documents establishing the independence of member churches and the principle of non-interference. Kirill dressed the Kremlin narrative in pious language. The conflict was not the fault of the Russian or the Ukrainian people, born from the same Kyivan baptismal font, united by their common faith, their saints, their prayers, and their common destiny. Western leaders were to blame for the expansion of NATO, threatening Russia, the arming of Ukraine, for imposing anti-Christian views on the Ukrainian population, the restriction of Russian language, and the Russophobia manifest in sanctions. It would be too long to discuss in detail the falsity of these accusations. But it is striking that the discourse of the head of the ROC is identical with that of Putin and his political propagandists.

On March 19 Olena Zelenska, the wife of the Ukrainian president, turned to Sauca in a moving personal letter, describing the unimaginable tragedy of the civilian population, of children, and asked that the WCC, a defender of peace, brotherhood, and social justice, to act as an advocate of Ukrainian victims, as

56 <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-of-rev-prof-dr-ioan-sauca-wcc-acting-general-secretary-on-ukraine>.

57 <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/letter-to-his-holiness-kirill-patriarch-of-moscow-and-all-russia-russian-orthodox-church>

58 In Russian: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/response-by-hh-patriarch-kirill-of-moscow-to-rev-prof-dr-ioan-sauca>, in English: <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/response-by-hh-patriarch-kirill-of-moscow-to-rev-prof-dr-ioan-sauca-english-translation>

Ukraine's active moral ally, a mediator of humanitarian aid. She asked the WCC to raise its prophetic voice, telling the world the truth about the war, condemning it and speaking up on behalf of the civilian population.⁵⁹

The WCC did not find its prophetic voice. The subsequent statements of the acting general secretary (starting from the spring of 2022) up to those of the new general secretary are examples of bothsidesism. Following Zelenska's letter, Sauca addressed not only the leader of the aggressor state but also President Zelensky.⁶⁰ Speaking of the suffering and despair on both sides, highlighting the suffering of Russian mothers, wives, and children, he likened those defending their country and families with the army of the aggressor, and equated the suffering of civilians exposed to Russian terror with the that of the relatives of the soldiers of the aggressor state. Claiming that ending the conflict and finding a peaceful solution depended on both presidents, he implicitly blamed the victim for the unwillingness to yield to the aggressor. Unnamed actors allegedly attempted to create a new division of the world and a new world order, a process in which the two presidents were not to be instrumental, nor allow a family conflict to turn international. In this reading, the West (the USA) was to blame for the war and Putin was implicitly portrayed as having launched an armed conflict out of necessity. On April 19, the acting general secretary appealed to Patriarch Kirill, asking him, the spiritual father of millions of Orthodox believers in Russia and Ukraine, to use his moral authority to speak out and call for an Easter ceasefire.⁶¹ Sauca complained that the WCC had unsuccessfully interceded with political leaders (i.e., the presidents of the two countries) for peaceful negotiations and a ceasefire. Here too, the plural suggests that both sides bore responsibility for the continuation of the conflict. In both letters Sauca adopted the Russian narrative of a fraternal, family conflict.

The inter-Orthodox consultation in Cyprus preceding the Karlsruhe assembly (organised by the WCC) is particularly problematic.⁶² While condemning wars (!),

59 <https://silerenonpossum.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Olena-Zelenska-letter.pdf>

60 2022.03.13, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-acting-general-secretary-letter-to-the-presidents-of-russia-and-ukraine>.

61 <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-acting-general-secretary-letter-to-his-holiness-kirill-patriarch-of-moscow-and-all-russia-russian>

62 Report of the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation for the 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, 2022 "Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity" Organized by the World Council of Churches & Hosted by the Orthodox Church of

the report called “upon all the parties involved in the conflicts to do everything within their power for the urgent establishment of peace and for ensuring safety in Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the whole world” (§24). The text concealed the identity of the aggressor and implied that peace depended on the victim, moreover that Russia’s security was threatened. The report adopted the language of the “Russian world”, speaking of suffering brotherly people. Hilarion, at that time the metropolitan of the Orthodox Church in Hungary, belittled the suffering caused by Russia, using the misleading notion of a shared family and communion that included the Ukrainian Orthodox.⁶³ He spoke with astonishing cynicism about the peace-making and humanitarian actions of the ROC during the “armed confrontation” in Ukraine. While it is well-known that during the siege of Mariupol the Azovstal plant was the last refuge for civilians, that Russian forces blocked all humanitarian aid deliveries, and that after capitulation civilians were deported to Russia or to the occupied territories, being prevented from reaching free Ukrainian territory,⁶⁴ Hilarion claimed that the ROC rescued the civilians held in Azovstal and provided humanitarian assistance to those fleeing to Russia, including children.⁶⁵

Ahead of the WCC General Assembly in Karlsruhe, the open support of the ROC for the aggression prompted multiple calls to the WCC to suspend the membership of this church. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, unequivocally condemned the war against Ukraine as “a nakedly aggressive, unprincipled act

Cyprus, Paralimni, Cyprus, May 10-15, 2022, in Ioan SAUCA – Vasile-Octavian MIHOC (eds.), *Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Karlsruhe. Christ’s Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity*, Geneva: WCC, 2022, 9–18 (§24).

63 HILARION, “Reconciliation”, 54, 56.

64 Human Rights Watch, “We Had No Choice”. “Filtration” and the Crime of Forcibly Transferring Ukrainian Civilians to Russia (2022.09.01.), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2022/09/ukraine0922_web.pdf.

65 HILARION, “Reconciliation”, 56–59. The role of the ROC in the abduction of children from the occupied territories is well-known. Vladyslav HAVRYLOV, “The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Forcible Deportation of Ukrainian Children”, *Collaborative on Global Children’s Issues*, Georgetown University (26.10.2023), <https://globalchildren.georgetown.edu/responses/the-role-of-the-russian-orthodox-church-in-the-forcible-deportation-of-ukrainian-children>, Ed VULLIAMY, “‘We had to Hide Them’: How Ukraine’s ‘Kidnapped’ Children led to Vladimir Putin’s Arrest Warrant”, *The Guardian* (18.03.2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/18/how-ukraine-kidnapped-children-led-to-vladimir-putins-arrest-warrant-russia>.

of violence against a neighbouring Christian nation”, called the use of Christian language to justify it unacceptable, and criticised the leaders of the ROC for their silence on the slaughter of innocents. Williams argued that the ROC should be expelled from the WCC in view of its blessing the war.⁶⁶

In an open letter to the leadership of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the WCC, German Lutheran theologians and historians pointed out that the presence of the ROC, spreading war propaganda, at the Karlsruhe assembly, contradicted the WCC’s conviction that war “is contrary to the will of God” (Amsterdam, 1948) and undermined the credibility of ecumenical efforts. The signatories urged the WCC and EKD to clarify their stance on the war and the behaviour of the ROC leadership, and to ensure that the perspective of the victims was heard. They requested the EKD to suspend the dialogue with the ROC, to strengthen ties with Ukrainian churches, and to focus on the suffering of the Ukrainian population. The WCC was asked to ensure the representation at the highest-level of both Ukrainian Orthodox churches and of Ukraine’s Protestant churches. The signatories urged the WCC to consider suspending the membership of the ROC.⁶⁷ The EKD and the WCC were demanded to “demonstrate their solidarity with the priests, pastors, deacons, and ordinary Christians who are risking their lives by resisting the war propaganda in Russia and elsewhere” (6), instead of focusing on the hierarchy of the ROC. This call points to a problem of the current ecumenical paradigm, namely the exclusive focus on institutional relations, on the hierarchy of the member and partner churches (specifically that of the ROC). This is true for the WCC, the EKD and the Catholic Church. This restriction of the ecumenical relations to the hierarchy of a church, notably when

66 Jonathan LUXMOORE, “Rowan Williams Adds his Voice to Calls for the WCC to Eject Russian Orthodox Church”, *Church Times* (5.04.2022), <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/8-april/news/world/rowan-williams-adds-his-voice-to-calls-for-the-wcc-to-eject-russian-orthodox-church>.

67 “Brief an die EKD und ÖRK: Klare Zeichen gegenüber dem Moskauer Patriarchat setzen”, NÖK (3.06.2022); Katharina KUNTER, Ellen UEBERSCHÄR, “Open Letter to the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches”, *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42.5 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2148.2364>. For the problematic response of the EKD to the war and to this initiative, on the German Ostpolitik of the 1970s, see the excellent analysis of Katharina KUNTER, “Still Sticking to the Big Brother. History, German Protestantism and the Ukrainian War”, *Studia UBB. Theologia Catholica Latina* 1 (2023) 71–91.

this ignores Christian teaching, ecumenical charters, human rights, and the most basic moral principles so blatantly, is highly problematic. This insight requires a reconsidering of the priorities and a focus of ecumenical relations on those church members and groups that are exposed to repression because of their faithfulness to Christian ethical principles.

In July 2022 an international group of theologians, scholars of religion, historians, and sociologists, belonging to various denominations, addressed a letter to the WCC, expressing their dismay at the tragic situation in Ukraine due to the unjust war waged by the RF, calling attention to the suffering of the civilian population, the war crimes, the devastation of the country and its cultural and religious heritage.⁶⁸ The justification of the military invasion by the ROC was incompatible with the position of the WCC on promoting a just peace and supporting the vulnerable.⁶⁹ The signatories urged the WCC to suspend the membership of the ROC until it clearly condemned the war against Ukraine, and asked the WCC to ensure the representation of all Ukrainian churches beginning with the Karlsruhe assembly.

The WCC did not respond to any of these calls. Before the Karlsruhe assembly, the Central Committee decided against the exclusion or suspension of the ROC, arguing that the WCC is a platform for dialogue and that exclusion would require a lengthy procedure. One of the largest delegations in Karlsruhe was that of the ROC. Lower rank representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox churches were invited as guests but could not contribute to the final statement or vote, whereas the ROC was part of the drafting committee, could criticise the final statement, and in spite of the bothsidesism that favoured Russia, voted against it.⁷⁰

68 “The International Network of Scientists Calls to Deprive the Russian Orthodox Church of Membership in the World Council of Churches”, *RISU* (27.07.2022); Andrew LOUTH, “Should the WCC Expel Patriarch Kirill?”, *Public Orthodoxy* (26.08.2022); Jonathan LUXMOORE, “WCC Again Urged to Suspend Russian Orthodox, as Conditions Worsen in Ukraine”, *Church Times* (29.07.2022). The initiative grew from an international conference organized by the Centre for Biblical Studies of the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj on *Religion and Politics in the Context of the War against Ukraine* (June 24-25, 2022).

69 *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (F&O Paper no. 214), 2013, §64, https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/The_Church_Towards_a_common_vision.pdf; Statement on the Way of Just Peace (10th General Assembly, 2013), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-the-way-of-just-peace>.

70 KUNTER, “Still Sticking to the Big Brother”, 82–89.

The Karlsruhe final statement addresses the war against Ukraine,⁷¹ referring clearly to the Russian invasion and the suffering of Ukrainians and condemns the illegal and unjustified war in unequivocal terms. It rejects the misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed aggression and hatred. Yet, it contains several problematic assertions. The appeal to all parties involved in the conflict to respect international humanitarian law “especially with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, and for the humane treatment of prisoners of war” is an expression of bothsidesism, since the Ukrainian civilian population suffers in many ways from Russian occupation, and Russian cruelty toward POW is staggering. It is hard to understand the appeal addressed to church leaders in both Russia and Ukraine to raise their voices against the killing, destruction, deportation, and disenfranchisement of the Ukrainian population, as if the Ukrainian churches would have incited to these acts. It is also incomprehensible that while criticising the increasing militarisation and weapons proliferation, the Statement calls on European governments and the international community to promote peace and non-violent conflict resolution but does not call on Russia to end the war. In doing so, it ignores the fact that the war would end immediately with the withdrawal of the Russian army, moreover, it implicitly questions Ukraine’s right to self-defence, which depends precisely on the supply of weapons. Finally, the repeated claim that the WCC is a platform and safe space for encounter and dialogue for all member churches, a dialogue enabled by the presence of the ROC delegation, passes under silence the ROC’s grave responsibility in justifying the war. At the assembly, the Russian delegation made no constructive initiatives toward dialogue or reconciliation. Its representatives did not condemn the war and dismissed the statement as ridiculous.

The ecclesial situation in Ukraine, the war and the circumstances of the latest WCC general assembly have highlighted a further problem. While the WCC membership of the ROC is unquestioned, the membership of the Ukrainian churches remains unresolved to this day, primarily because of the opposition of the ROC. The UOC-MP could so far participate in WCC assemblies only as part of the Russian delegation. This meant that while the general tendency in Orthodox churches was to obtain recognised status (autocephaly) for national/

71 “War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region”, Statement by the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/war-in-ukraine-peace-and-justice-in-the-european-region>.

regional churches, the ROC has appropriated the right to decide over the churches representing millions of believers belonging to other countries, in view of its pretended “canonical territory”, which overlapped with that of the former Soviet Union.⁷² After the full-scale invasion, on May 27, 2022, the UOC-MP declared its independence from the Moscow Patriarchate,⁷³ but its status remains unclear (neither “independence” nor “autonomy” are canonical categories). The MP, as reflected on the WCC’s official website, continues to treat it as part of the ROC, as a “self-governed church with the right of broad autonomy”.⁷⁴

Meanwhile, the autocephalous OCU, recognised by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, could not become a member of the WCC due to the opposition of the MP, and the WCC was unwilling to overcome this obstacle. Again, institutional ecumenical considerations prevailed. After the outbreak of the war, the OCU was allowed to apply for membership, but no decision has been taken; in Karlsruhe it could participate only as an observer.⁷⁵ In June 2025, the Central Committee of the WCC met in Johannesburg, but did not approve the membership of the OCU (while admitting four Protestant churches whose number of members is well below that of the OCU).⁷⁶

After the assembly, a WCC delegation headed by Ioan Sauca visited Moscow, for talks with Patriarch Kirill, in the hope that these discussions could advance peace and reconciliation, stop the bloodshed, and avert the danger of a nuclear catastrophe. The report of the visit on the WCC website created the impression

72 On the relatively recent emergence of the notion of canonical territory in ROC discourse: Jacob LASSIN, “Delineating Canonical Space in Russian Orthodox Church and Ukrainian Orthodox Church Online Media”, *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 67.1–2 (2025) 64–80 (65–66), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2025.2496059>.

73 FYLYPOVYCH, “Security Challenges”, 63–80.

74 Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), <https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/russian-orthodox-church-moscow-patriarchate>.

75 Cyril HOVORUN, “The Institutionalized Ecumenism and the Ukrainian War: a Critical Approach”, *Religion in Praxis* (25.10.2022), <https://religioninpraxis.com/the-institutionalized-ecumenism-and-the-ukrainian-war-a-critical-approach/>.

76 The Apostolic Pentecostal Church International from Liberia, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (Malawi), the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, and the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (with 71956 members). Central Committee, June 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/events/central-committee-meeting>; also WCC welcomes four new member churches.

that the parties agreed in condemning the “holy war”.⁷⁷ However, this does not correspond to reality. As Hovorun notes, the patriarch did not speak of a holy war but of a SMO and of “metaphysical war”. He did not condemn the war; instead, he again portrayed Russia as a victim of political circumstances and dismissed the appeal by saying that churches should not add fuel to the fire.⁷⁸

There is also a deeper problem with the position of the WCC and other ecclesial bodies, which Katharina Kunter calls the “dialogue dogma”.⁷⁹ When a church is entirely refractory to dialogue in the true sense of the word and its hierarchy is so thoroughly politicised that it becomes an instrument of an aggressor state, openly promoting war propaganda, encouraging a war that leads to thousands of deaths, no meaningful dialogue can take place. More seriously, overlooking the grave responsibility of the ROC and pandering to it at the cost of truth distorts the role of ecumenical bodies and ecumenical relations. Ecumenical bodies become irrelevant if not outright responsible for condoning such attitude. As Hovorun remarks, by unconditionally permitting the ROC to participate in the Karlsruhe general assembly and through the visit to Moscow, the WCC allowed itself to be instrumentalised, offering a broad international platform for the war narratives of the Kremlin. It did not succeed however in promoting genuine dialogue; conversely, it discredited the ecumenical movement.⁸⁰

77 “His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, WCC acting general secretary meet in Moscow, agreeing that war cannot be holy”, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/his-holiness-patriarch-kirill-wcc-acting-general-secretary-meet-in-moscow-agreeing-that-war-cannot-be-holy>.

78 HOVORUN, “Institutionalized Ecumenism”, *ibid.* Also “WCC Communique: His Holiness Patriarch Kirill Meets with WCC Acting General Secretary”, (19 October 2022), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-communique-his-holiness-patriarch-kirill-meets-with-wcc-acting-general-secretary>.

79 KUNTER, “Still Sticking to the Big Brother”, 86.

80 HOVORUN, “Institutionalized Ecumenism”, *ibid.* (he also notes that the WCC failed to give the ROC the opportunity to assume responsibility, repent, and purify itself, because it remained silent about its complicity in supporting the war); *Id.*, “How to Not Build a ‘Potemkin Village’ of Ecumenism and Peacemaking”, *NÖK* (15.06.2023), <https://noek.info/hintergrund/2949-how-to-not-build-a-potemkin-village-of-ecumenism-and-peacemaking>; Petr KRATOCHVÍL, “Nesoulad v církvích podkopává jejich morální autoritu během války”, *Proboha!* (23.12.2024), <https://proboha.cz/magazin/vyber-redakce/petr-kratochvil/2024/12/nesoulad-v-cirkvich-podkopava-jejich-moralni-autoritu-behem-valky/>.

The same occurred during the visit of the new WCC general secretary, Jerry Pillay, to Moscow (following that to Kyiv) in May 2023, where he essentially sought to ingratiate himself with the MP. During the meetings and in the subsequent statements, he echoed the Russian narrative. He expressed concern about the alleged discrimination against the UOC-MP and the restriction of religious freedom (despite the position of the Lutheran president of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations), yet he failed to address the grave violations of religious freedom in the occupied territories and in Russia. Speaking of nationalism in vague, impersonal terms, he did not raise his voice against open Russian imperialism. Since the delegation was not given permission, they did not visit Ukrainian prisoners of war or abducted children. Using Hovorun's fitting metaphor, the acts of the WCC amount to "a Potemkin village of ecumenism and peacemaking".⁸¹

The WCC needed two weeks to respond to the decree of the WRPC (*The Present and Future of the Russian World*, discussed above), which called the Russian invasion a holy war.⁸² The statement signed by Jerry Pillay claimed that the notion of "holy war" was incompatible with Patriarch Kirill's earlier statement, according to which "holy war" referred to a metaphysical war, not to an armed conflict, and that a war cannot be holy. Further, so the WCC, the decree of the RWPC contradicted the condemnation of the war by the final report of the Karlsruhe general assembly, drafted with the participation of the ROC.⁸³ The WCC rightly rejected the idea that the invasion of Ukraine could be regarded as the national liberation struggle of the Russian people "against the criminal Kyiv regime and the so-called collective West behind it", as well as the claim that Ukraine should fall within Russia's exclusive sphere of influence. At the same time, the surprise of the WCC at these positions, as well as the request to Kirill to clarify whether this decree expressed indeed the position of the ROC, reflect a striking naivety.

81 HOVORUN, "How to Not Build a 'Potemkin Village'", <https://noek.info/hintergrund/2949-how-to-not-build-a-potemkin-village-of-ecumenism-and-peacemaking>. He discusses the hate speech proffered by Leonid Gorbachev, sanctioned by Ukraine, and the fact that Mikhail Gundyayev, Kirill's nephew, continues to work at the WCC headquarters in Geneva.

82 KRATOCHVÍL, "Nesoulad", <https://proboha.cz/magazin/vyber-redakce/petr-kratochvil/2024/12/nesoulad-v-cirkvich-podkopava-jejich-moralni-autoritu-behem-valky/>.

83 WCC Statement on Decree of XXV World Russian People's Council (12.04.2024), <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-statement-on-decree-of-xxv-world-russian-peoples-council>.

Numerous statements by Kirill made his stance entirely clear. The open letters mentioned earlier, which called for the suspension of the ROC membership in the WCC, clearly drew the attention of the governing bodies of the WCC to the fact that the ROC openly supported the military aggression against Ukraine. The urgent clarifying meeting Pillay requested from Kirill in April 2024 did not materialise. (Kirill had proposed a preliminary meeting, with the participation of the representatives of the ROC at the WCC.)⁸⁴

At the meeting in Johannesburg in June 2025 of the WCC Central Committee issued a “Statement on Threats to Peace and People’s Security: A Kairos Moment for Just Peace” which addressed a number of military conflicts, including the war in Ukraine.⁸⁵ It detailed the increasing number of Russian missile attacks on civilians and infrastructure, mentioning the number of victims of the largest attacks on Kryvyi Rih, Sumy and Kyiv between April and June 2025, and mentioned that many others were recorded on an almost daily basis; these were “wrongdoings of the Russian authorities in their ongoing invasion and war against the Ukrainian people”. However, in the spirit of bothsidesism, it also noted with concern the reports of attacks impacting passenger trains in Bryansk and Kursk (Russia) in late May and early June, attributed to Ukraine, without mentioning that Russia used the routes for military purposes, and without checking the truth of the Russian reports. Thus, the WCC equalled these events with Russia’s deliberate, widespread and constant attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, claiming hundreds of victims (the list could be continued with further horrific attacks up to the present day).⁸⁶

84 “Report of the WCC General Secretary Rev. Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay at the WCC Executive Committee Meeting Convening in Paralimni, Cyprus, 21–26 November 2024”, 18–20, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/report-of-the-wcc-general-secretary-at-the-executive-committee-in-paralimni-cyprus>.

85 24 June 2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-threats-to-peace-and-peoples-security-a-kairos-moment-for-just-peace>.

86 See the critique of Cyril Hovorun, “Der ÖRK und Russlands Krieg: Komplizenschaft durch vorsätzliche Blindheit”, *NÖK* (2.07.2025), also “The World Council of Churches and Ukraine: Between Condemnation and Complicity”, *One Church* (July 1, 2025), <https://ecerkva.com/en/news/1384-the-world-council-of-churches-and-ukraine-between-condemnation-and-complicity>. (He details the circumstances of the train accident in Bryansk, showing that the WCC was not concerned with verifying the report.)

The lack of moral clarity, the conciliatory, even friendly attitude of the WCC toward the ROC, shows that the most important institution of the ecumenical movement is profoundly politicised and vulnerable to (church-)political manipulation to such an extent that it is unable to speak out and act in the spirit of truth and justice. This has to do partly with the tremendous influence of the ROC within the WCC both at the level of leadership structures (having five representatives in the Central Committee) and informally, through Orthodox churches sympathetic to Moscow, other churches with traditional pro-Russian sympathies, and through Russia's presence in the global South. This is why the WCC has reacted so weakly to Patriarch Kirill's discourse legitimising the war. Further, the representatives of the various churches are not free from political and ideological prejudices and misconceptions which Russian propaganda has been spreading for decades. These include the negative perception of Ukraine, the blame of the West (the US, NATO) for the Russian invasion, and the claim that the allegedly decadent West is attacking Christian values.⁸⁷ Ultimately, the WCC has proved to be just as powerless in handling crises linked to wars as the UN in resolving international political crises.

The European Churches, the Charta Oecumenica (2025), and a Statement

The new Ecumenical Charter addresses war briefly, in chapter 11 ("Striving for Peace and Reconciliation"), in one paragraph.⁸⁸ Chapter 13 ("Journeying with Migrants, Refugees and Displaced People") may also touch on the subject implicitly, although war is not mentioned among the many factors driving migration.

In a time when a European country faces an unprecedented aggression since almost four years (eleven years, considering the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas war waged by Russia since 2014), the discussion of war and peace is

87 On the way politics are interwoven in the responses of the churches and the claim of remaining apolitical conceals clear political views and decisions: Stefan KUBE, "'To Put Politics Aside'? Reflections on Theological and Non-Theological Factors Within Ecumenical Dialogue", in Yury P. AVVAKUMOV – Oleh TURIY (eds.), *The Churches and the War: Religion, Religious Diplomacy, and Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine*, Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2024, 139–152.

88 Conference of European Churches and Council of European Bishops' Conferences, *Charta Oecumenica Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe* (2025), <https://www.ccee.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/11/Charta-oecumenica-PDF-con-guideline-A4-final2.pdf#page=5.07>

abstract and amounts to a set of platitudes. Wars are ineffective in resolving controversies between nations and non-violence is always preferable. Churches should pray for peace as a divine gift and actively work to build it every day through justice and love. The Charta evokes Christ's call for love for enemies and endorses reconciliation by offering and seeking forgiveness. Working for peace means creating spaces for dialogue among people of good will, laying the groundwork for justice and peaceful coexistence.

The only merit of the chapter consists in the acknowledgement of the right to self-defence (though not with these specific words): while wars are ineffective in solving conflicts between nations, the signatories "recognise that we are sometimes confronted with the tragic reality of choosing between allowing violence to continue or using force to end it".

The churches commit themselves to promoting peace, creating spaces of encounter, undeterred by the war, using religious resources to foster healing and peace, and actively supporting efforts toward reconciliation. The idea of spaces of encounter and dialogue, mentioned twice, echoes the response of the WCC about the reason the ROF was not suspended or excluded for supporting the Russian aggression.

The Charta has nothing to say about the injustice of the wars of aggression, about the responsibility and the accountability of the perpetrators (even if only as a general principle), and it does not acknowledge the suffering of the victims of the war. The commitments do not encompass solidarity with and support for the victims of military aggression. The commandment of love for enemies is extrapolated without any further discussion to international military conflicts. The emphasis on reconciliation without any distinction between perpetrator and victim ultimately sustains injustice and undermines the human dignity of the victims.

A very different statement was published recently by the participants in a conference organised by the Conference of European Churches [CEC] in collaboration with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Orthodox Church of Finland, *Churches Confront the 'Russian World' Ideology* (Helsinki, 1–3 December 2025). The conference has joined around ninety church leaders, and representatives of churches, national councils of churches and scholars.⁸⁹ The final statement, on "Resisting

⁸⁹ Conference Statement Shares How Churches Can Confront "Russian World" Ideology (8.12.2025), <https://ceceurope.org/conference-statement-shares-how-churches-can-confront-russian-world-ideology>.

Empire, Promoting Peace” is particularly clear in critiquing the unprovoked war against Ukraine and its ideological backing, the ideology of the ‘Russian world’, and in addressing the theological problems related to the use of this ideology to back the war. The statement formulates clear commitments on resisting imperial ideology and building peace and reconciliation.⁹⁰ Its limited impact, however, is related to the fact that the Statement is not an official statement of the CEC but reflects the position of the church representatives and scholars attending.

Conclusions

The war against Ukraine, the most terrible armed confrontation on the European continent after World War II, has revealed the failure of the churches and of the institutional ecumenical movement in addressing a war of aggression. Well-entrenched concepts, like promoting change through integration (the motor behind the Ostpolitik), neutrality, the myth of (institutional) dialogue allegedly capable of solving all conflicts, pacifism and its younger and more subtle version, just peace (meant to replace the concept of just war), have all failed.

In most cases, church leadership and ecumenical bodies have proved unable to respond to the most basic expectation: to distinguish clearly between victim and aggressor.

Bothsidesism, the idea that responsibility and suffering are equally present on both sides, is one of the major problems, as it transfers responsibility, at least in part, onto the victim, and exonerates the perpetrator (who often remains unnamed). By emphasising the suffering of the aggressor state, it minimises the suffering of the innocent victims and the role of the perpetrator. Bothsidesism allows thereby the continuation of aggression.

Religious clichés, like the repeated appeals to dialogue, peace, brotherhood, and reconciliation, do not offer an adequate response to a war of aggression. In the absence of justice and fairness, these commendable principles and values turned to be empty slogans.

The churches and ecumenical bodies have failed to realise that ecumenical relations cannot be equated with diplomatic affairs engaging the hierarchy of a

⁹⁰ *Resisting Empire, Promoting Peace: Churches Confront the ‘Russian World’ Ideology. Conference Statement*, https://ceceurope.org/storage/app/media/2025-news/Helsinki%20Conference%20statement_final.pdf

given church, but must consider the faith, experiences, and suffering of the entire church, notably of its persecuted members. Further, as important as diplomacy would be, the churches cannot act as political institutions, without a clear, truthful stance on a war of aggression.

A change of paradigm in institutional ecumenical relations is direly needed. However, the stance of most churches (apart from the Ecumenical Patriarchate) and of the major ecumenical bodies over the past four years leaves little room for optimism. For the moment, some reason for hope can be found only in the statements of certain church representatives and groups of scholars.

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