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World Council of Churches (WCC) Should Raise the Visibility of Ukrainian Orthodox at the World Assembly (Karlsruhe, Sept. 2022)¹

Interview with Professor Katharina Kunter

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The acting general secretary of the WCC, Ioan Sauca, has written to Patriarch Kirill as well as Russian President Vladimir Putin and to Ukrainian President Volodymir Zelensky, and urged an immediate cessation of war. How do you regard this action of the World Council of Churches, in light of the war in the Ukraine?

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has struck at the heart of the WCC's more pro-Russian ecumenical self-understanding. It was fortunate that Metropolitan Onufrij (Berezovskij) of Kyiev and all Ukraine, positioned himself on February 24 very clearly against the war of brothers. Metropolitan Onufrij belongs to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOK), which, as part of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is a member of the WCC. Hence the WCC could base itself early on Onufrij's statement, joining him in condemning the war--without so obviously needing a too public confrontation with ROC.

The personal diplomatic correspondence of Sauca with Presidents Putin and Zelensky, as well as with Patriarch Kirill from the ROC in church political terms was neither smooth nor successful. On the contrary, in his response letter on March 10 to the WCC, Kirill demonstratively defended the war in line with Russian propaganda, namely that the West and NATO were responsible for the war. The Russian war narrative does have friends happy to critique the West oriented WCC. Yet the fact that Kirill did not engage Saucas' reconciling tone, instead had the nerve to politically instrumentalize against the ecumenical dialogue way of thinking, must have been a huge personal disappointment for Sauca.

Since then the public statements about the war in Ukraine coming from the WCC have become more politically concrete: In a position statement of March 30, not only was the Russian aggression clearly condemned and Ukraine's state sovereignty affirmed, but also underlined the

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right of the Ukrainian people, to defend itself against this aggression. In a more recent public statement, the WCC has pointed to the suffering God, and a strengthened sacrificial perspective.

The church leadership of the ROC supports the Russian invasive war ideologically. What does that signal for the future ecumenical cooperation with the Moscow Patriarchate?

The church leadership of the ROC is supporting the invasive war not only ideologically but has also provided Putin with the religious-theological framing for the war.

The WCC has understood itself always strongly oriented toward the discipleship of the Confessing Church and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Accordingly, during the second World War the WCC did not seek dialogue with the Nazi friendly German Evangelical Church, but rather supported individual members of the Confessing Church. The frequently cited Barmen Theological Statement of 1934 is directed against the false theology and the Nazi friendly “German Christians,” who sought to align the Evangelical Church with the dictatorship of the Fuehrer.

In the face of such a historic background, and for theological reasons, I consider it necessary that the WCC clearly distances itself from the *volkish*-nationalist political theology of the ROC church leadership and starts to search for today’s Russian Confessing Church. Only out of such a search can we reach something like the “Stuttgart Confession,” an ecumenical new beginning and reconciliation process.

In early September the WCC world assembly will take place in Karlsruhe. The Russian Orthodox Church has already named its delegates. Unclear is, how the Ukrainian Church can be granted a voice. What would you advise the WCC?

The WCC finds itself in a great dilemma: the ROC has a post-imperial self-understanding. The UOK, with about 13% of the Orthodox believers in the Ukraine, especially in the eastern and south-eastern regions, is therefore seen as “merely” an institutional and national under-part of the ROC. This persisting membership construction of the ROC in the WCC is problematic. It legitimizes the Russian history myth of the inseparability of the holy people of Russia, to which the Ukrainian people belong as Russian people, institutionally and officially. So, Ukraine is denied the right, to present itself in the WCC as its own Ukrainian nation with its own church.

This imperial way of thinking reveals itself in the latest shift in appointing delegates of the ROC for Karlsruhe. Originally for the ROC delegation three representatives of the UOK were named, including Metropolitan Onufrij. Now there is only one delegate from the UOK: who is close to the Russian delegation, viewed as pro-Russian hardliner, namely Metropolitan Luka (Kovalenko) from Zaporizhzhja and Melitopol. His territory of parish control is most likely going to be fully occupied by Russia, and annexed, by the time of the Karlsruhe Assembly.

So, what can the WCC and the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) as host church do, so that at the Karlsruhe Assembly not to have to observe a war-justified propaganda show of the ROC?

I think, that the WCC Executive Committee meeting in June, will not be able to expel the ROC. In my view, that leaves only one reasonable solution, in order as ecumenical assembly to remain credible. The Ukraine must be made visible as Church in Karlsruhe. That means, the WCC (or the EKD) must immediately and officially approach the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OKU). They should offer it a “fast-track-membership in the WCC and offer it a visual public forum at the full assembly. The OKU is now already the largest Orthodox Church in the Ukraine, with nearly 50% of all Orthodox believers. Currently, while the war rages, daily parishes and monasteries are deciding to leave the UOK and to transfer to the OKU. One should, for church political and ecumenical reasons, openly and constructively support a union of OKU and UOK. How the ROC reacts to the situation, remains to be seen. In any case the WCC would have opened up a diplomatic space to negotiate and need not react under pressure. Even if the ROC were to leave WCC membership, it would not be the WCC that had expelled them.

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