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"Letter to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches," by the Conference on Religion and Politics in the Context of the War Against Ukraine

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To the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches,

Revd. Prof. Dr. Ioan Sauca, Acting General Secretary,

and the Presidents of the World Council of Churches

World Council of Churches
150, route de Ferney
CP 2100, 1211 Genève 2
Suisse

23 July 2022

Revd. Prof. Dr. Ioan Sauca,

Dear members of the Central Committee, Rev. Bishop Mary Ann Swenson, Dr. Agnes Abuom, Your Eminence Metropolitan Nifon of Târgoviște,

Honoured Presidents of the WCC, Rev. Prof. Dr Sang Chang, Your Excellency, Rev. Dr. Archbishop Anders Wejryd, Rev. Gloria Nohemy Ulloa Alvarado, Rev. Dr. Mele'ana Puloka, Your Beatitude John, Your Holiness Karekin,

We are an international network of scholars – theologians, religious studies scholars, historians, sociologists of religion –, belonging to different denominations (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Evangelical) or without religious affiliation, who share a profound concern for the tragic situation in Ukraine. This reflection and appeal has grown from several dialogues and initiatives, such as the open letter of German Protestant scholars to the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) and the World Council of Churches (3 June 2022) and the conference on *Religion and Politics in the Context of the War Against Ukraine* (Centre for Biblical Studies of the Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj, 24-25 June 2022).

We are deeply troubled by the unjust war waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, by the terrible suffering the Russian military and mercenary troops inflict on the people of Ukraine, on civilian men and women, children and elderly, by the devastation of entire cities and villages, by the destruction of Ukraine's cultural and religious heritage, and the informational war promoting hate speech and disinformation.

What makes us speak and address the WCC, aside from the injustice of this war, is the fact that the military invasion and the atrocious war crimes perpetrated by the Russian troops in Ukraine are justified and legitimised ideologically by the doctrine generally known as the "Russian world". This aggression is styled as a "metaphysical struggle" allegedly meant to defend Christian values and a traditional civilization, as a particular mission of the Russian

Orthodox Church. Extremely cynically, an unjustifiable war which results in the unceasing shelling of countless settlements, the torture of civilians and prisoners of war, the rape of women and children, the killing of innocent civilians, the deportations, the separation of hundreds of thousands of children from their families and their deportation to Russia, the indoctrination of school children and their prohibition to speak in their native language in the temporarily occupied territories, – all these crimes are endorsed by the Russian Orthodox Church and by Patriarch Kirill himself in the name of defending Christian values and the family.

The world of the sermons of Patriarch Kirill is that of “alternative facts”. The war waged by Russia in Ukraine, in the Donbas since 2014 (following the Revolution of Dignity), with Russian military without insignia and by arming separatist forces, a war that has cost [over 14000 lives](#) (UN) up to the end of 2021, is described as a legitimate uprising of the Russian-speaking population, occasioned by the attack of foreign powers, of the evil West, against Christian civilization in the Russian land. In this rhetoric, alleged threats to traditional values (gay rights and gay parades held in Ukraine) would justify the annihilation of human life and the devastation of Ukraine.

Thus, in his [homily of 27 February](#) at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, Patriarch Kirill has blamed hostile external forces for the conflict in Ukraine, and spoke about the need to repulse the attacks of the evil one. Through references to the Holy Rus, to the one ecclesial space, and to the Russian land as including Ukraine, he clearly affirmed the core tenets of the doctrine of the Russkij mir and of the Holy Rus, denying the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state.

In his [sermon of 6 March](#) at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour (ironically, on Forgiveness Sunday), speaking of the preparation for Easter as a time of “spiritual spring” and the “rebirth of life”, while Ukraine was invaded and shelled, he motivated the “grave events related to the deterioration of the political situation in the Donbass, practically the outbreak of hostilities” with external attempts to destroy Christian faith and sins against divine commandments, chiefly by organising gay parades, as a sign of loyalty to corrupt Western powers. The war in Ukraine was described as an eschatological combat, a metaphysical struggle between those faithful to divine commandments and their Orthodox faith, and the evil powers.

Following the [letter of Fr. Ioan Sauca](#), Acting General Secretary of the WCC, who deplored the “tragic situation of the war in Ukraine” that “has brought tremendous suffering and loss of lives” and urged the head of the Russian Orthodox Church to raise up his “voice so that the war can be stopped”, Patriarch Kirill responded in a letter severely distorting the facts ([10 March](#)). He shifted again the blame to Ukraine and the West, legitimising the Russian invasion with falsehoods pertaining to the Russian propaganda, without uttering a single word about the fact that Russia was the invader, not the victim, let alone condemning the war. He also rejected the appeal of Fr. Sauca as an alleged illegitimate involvement of the WCC in the dealings of another Church (the ROC), in breach of the Toronto Statement.

Recently, in his sermon of [21 June](#) given to injured military at the St. Luke hospital church of the A.A. Vishnevsky Central Military Clinical Hospital (Novy, Krasnogorsk), Patriarch Kirill has challenged the core Christian belief that God is Love (contrary to 1 John 4,8.16). Referring to the representation of Archangel Michael as warrior and chief commander

(*archistrategos*), the patriarch spoke again about Russian soldiers' combat as part of a metaphysical struggle, "the struggle between good and evil", that "takes place both along state borders and along many other borders that divide human society". Russian servicemen, the army, were thus depicted as being on the side of Good and deserving thereby divine support. Thus, in a shocking distortion of facts and values, Patriarch Kirill identified again the aggressor (Russia) with the forces of the Good, demonised Ukraine and the West as the embodiment of evil, legitimising once more the attack on a sovereign state and the destruction of human life. Waging war and conquering the territories of another state was thus presented as a work pleasing to God.

This sermon was pronounced only three days after the [WCC Central Committee Statement on the War in Ukraine](#) (18 June 2022). In this Statement, following several other declarations and appeals, the Central Committee has properly assessed the situation in Ukraine, deploring the illegal and unjustifiable war launched by the Russian Federation, inflicted on the people and sovereign state of Ukraine, and has rightly noted the "appalling toll of death, destruction and displacement". In the same statement, the Central Committee of the WCC has acknowledged and welcomed "the commitment of the Moscow Patriarchate – representing the WCC's constituency in both Russia and Ukraine – to engage in encounter and dialogue on the situation in Ukraine under the auspices of the WCC". This alleged commitment of the Moscow Patriarchate and of the ROC proves to be empty, as indicated by the 21 June sermon of Patriarch Kirill (mentioned above), and by the fact that over the four months of the war, this Church has done nothing to condemn or attempt to stop the brutal aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. Quite the contrary, it has provided time and again ideological fuel to the war. (See also Patriarch Kirill's sermon on [3 May](#).)

We should remind ourselves that since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, according to conservative counts, the number of civilian casualties confirmed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([July 18](#)) was of 5110 persons (killed), including 346 children. Furthermore, the "OHCHR believes that the actual figures are considerably higher". These figures do not include the number of deaths in areas where intensive fighting does not allow the counting of victims; only in Mariupol many thousands of civilians have been killed and buried in mass graves or left under the ruins.

The destruction of the cultural and religious heritage of Ukraine is also appalling. As of 18 July, according to evidence kept by [UNESCO](#), Russian attacks partially or totally destroyed 164 cultural sites, including 72 religious sites. A higher number is documented by [Ruslan Khalikov](#). The documentation of this destruction is carried out by the [Institute of Religious Freedom of Ukraine](#) (full report forthcoming in July) and within the project [Religion on Fire: Documenting Russia's War Crimes against Religious Communities in Ukraine](#). A small insight was given on March 31 (!) by the BBC-piece "[In pictures: The Ukrainian Religious Sites Ruined by Fighting](#)". Examples of destruction include the [Wooden All Saints' Hermitage](#) of the Sviatohirsk Lavra (MP!), from the 19th century, completely destroyed (while over 500 civilians were finding refuge at the monastery), together with the Our Lady of the Joy of All Who Sorrow Skete and St. George's Skete; the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (built in 1801-1804) in Chernihiv, the Holy Ascension Cathedral (All-Holy Church) in Izyum (built in 1826, completed in 1902-1903) in Kharkiv region, the Church of the Cross (built in 1809-1823) also in Kharkiv region; the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin (UOC-MP), built in 1862 (Vyazivka Naroditsky district of Zhytomyr region), the [St.](#)

[Andrew Church](#) (UOC), in the village of Horenka, near Gostomel (Kyiv region, completely destroyed) and many others. Not even sacred spaces, and not even those under the jurisdiction of the MP are spared in this invasion.

The cynicism behind the alleged defence of Christian values is also attested by the unwillingness to support a ceasefire during Easter, the most important Christian feast, and the religious justification of a war which also involves non-Christian mercenary fighting against a majority Orthodox country, in which a significant number of believers belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate.

Patriarch Kirill is not a simple cleric, he is the head of the largest Orthodox Church, who claims to hold the authority of the “Third Rome”, exerts immense spiritual and financial influence over numerous autocephalous and subordinated Orthodox Churches in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, who styles himself as the defender of persecuted Christians in the world. This power makes his attitude and that of the ROC all the more serious, and the responsibility all the greater.

Referring to the role of the Church in society, the Faith and Order Paper [The Church: Towards a Common Vision](#) (F&O No. 214; §64) shows that Christians “believe that *God, who is absolute love, mercy and justice, can work through them*”. They are expected to follow in the footsteps of Christ, “who *challenged authorities who showed little regard for human dignity or the will of God. The Church needs to help those without power in society to be heard*; at times it must become a voice for those who are voiceless. ... As followers of the “Prince of Peace,” *Christians advocate peace, especially by seeking to overcome the causes of war (principal among which are economic injustice, racism, ethnic and religious hatred, exaggerated nationalism, oppression and the use of violence to resolve differences)*”. Consequently, any Church that instead of working for peace heightens the causes of war, and instead of speaking for the voiceless victims, instead of standing up to authorities who show no regard for human dignity and human life, serves their inhumane political agenda, gravely fails to fulfil its fundamental mission. Such an attitude is incompatible with the values and principles that go with membership in the World Council of Churches. It also goes against the principles and commitments formulated in the [Statement on the Way of Just Peace](#), adopted by the WCC 10th Assembly as part of the Report of the Public Issues Committee in 2013.

All these considered,

1. we call upon the WCC to suspend the membership of the ROC, as long as it does not condemn in unequivocal terms the war against Ukraine, through the voice of its highest authority, and as long as Patriarch Kirill uses his spiritual and political power to fuel the war, instead of intervening by the political authorities of the Russian Federation to stop the aggression against Ukraine.
2. we call upon the WCC to ensure, starting with the forthcoming General Assembly in Karlsruhe (31 August-8 September 2022), the representation of all Churches in Ukraine, most notably the Orthodox Church in Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, as well as other Christian denominations, taking into account the need to offer a voice to so far marginalised Christian communities, in particular now, when they suffer so much because of the horrors of the war.

We also urge the WCC to hear the voices of the academia, to engage with Ukrainian and international scholars regarding the religious and political situation in Ukraine, to use their insights and professional expertise in order to obtain a fuller and more adequate picture regarding the situation in Ukraine. Such experts could provide solutions and recommendations for actions.

3. we call upon the WCC to do everything in its power to avoid causing any humiliation and suffering to Christians in Ukraine by siding with a Church that supports their annihilation, by exposing them to encounters and “dialogues” with representatives of that Church. Member Churches of the WCC should strive to be on the right side, and stand by the victim, not the aggressor.
4. we call upon the WCC to hear the voice of the oppressed in the Russian Orthodox Church, to defend courageous priests and believers who have spoken out against the war, have stood up for the truth and for their Ukrainian brothers and sisters in faith, risking or suffering severe punishment. (Such are, e.g., [Fr. Georgy Edelshtein](#) and [Fr. Ioann Burdin](#) from Kostroma oblast, the latter fined, removed from priesthood and risking a jail sentence), [Fr. Ioann Kurmoyarov](#), PhD in theology, removed from priesthood and arrested, charged for “spreading ‘false information’ about the Russian military”, [Fr. Nikandr Pinchuk](#), rector of the parish of St. Simeon Verkhoturysky in Verkhoturys, Sverdlovsk Region. We add the courageous and outspoken [appeal of the priests and deacons of the Russian Orthodox Church](#) (with almost 300 signatories), to end the fratricidal war in Ukraine and an immediate ceasefire. Even more exposed are civilians, in particular [women](#), who have shown great courage in protesting against the War. In this sense we need to bear in mind the [Appeal from Laity of the Russian Orthodox Church to Patriarch Kirill](#), which reminded that “the Church is the Body of Christ, and believers are its members”, a Body “bleeding as Russian soldiers, among whom there are Orthodox Christians, are killing our brothers and sisters in Ukraine, depriving them of a roof over their heads, undermining their health and welfare, forcing them to leave their homes, stealing the future of an entire country. The most vulnerable – children, women and the elderly – are among the victims of the war.” These outspoken lay persons have appealed to Patriarch Kirill to fulfil his “calling as an intercessor before the authorities of Russia”, for his “flock, which is the victim of military action, for the people who are deprived of their homes and livelihoods”, “to send out an epistle to the entire body of the Russian Orthodox Church, and publicly condemn the deeds of those who support bloodshed”. While promoting inter-ecclesial relations, the WCC should not forget that the Church cannot be simply equated with the hierarchy, all the more with its representatives guilty of the current tragedy by actively endorsing it or by keeping silent. Ecumenical relations do not equal diplomatic relations with the hierarchy of a particular Church, but need to take into account the faith, experience and suffering of the entire people of God. We also ask you therefore to consider inviting those members of the ROC who oppose the war, recognizing that they will never be included in the official delegation of the ROC.

5. we call upon the WCC, its representatives, as well as the member Churches to (continue to) speak clearly, openly identifying the aggressor and avoiding any equivocal language that would diffuse the blame onto the victim, would create the impression that the victim shares in the responsibility for the war, or would victimise the aggressor. We highly appreciate the outspokenness of the declarations of the WCC. But we find problematic some ambiguous affirmations like the one in the [Report of the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation](#) (Cyprus, 10-15 May 2022) in which participants, beside condemning the wars (!) have 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). It is fundamental to keep in mind that there can be no peace without justice, there can be no just peace when an aggressor imposes its will on a sovereign state by military force. Christian Churches cannot be part of such injustice.

We sincerely hope that our heartfelt appeal will be heard.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ivan ALMES (Ukraine), Associate Professor, Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv, Director of Ihor Skochylias Center for Religious Culture, religious affiliation: Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

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Dr. Pawel WROBLEWSKI (Poland), Asst. Prof. at the University of Wroclaw, Head of the Centre for Predictive Research on Religious Changes, Deputy Director of the Institute of Philosophy, religious affiliation: Orthodox Church.

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Revd. Prof. Dr. Roman ZAVIYSKY (Ukraine), President of the Ukrainian branch of the European Society of Catholic Theology, religious affiliation: Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

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Other intellectuals who support the appeal

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Ing. Vladimír KOMÁREK (Czech Republic), technician, religious affiliation: Roman Catholic Church.

RNDr. Václav KŘEČEK (Czech Republic), religious affiliation: Roman Catholic Church.

MVDr. PhD. Pavel KULICH (Czech Republic), Veterinary Research Institute, religious affiliation: Roman Catholic Church.

Dr. Václav PEŇÁZ (Czech Republic), MUDr., Doctor, Hospital of Třebíč, religious affiliation: Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren.

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