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UKRAINE “CRUCIFIED” BETWEEN THE EAST AND WEST

by Peter Kuzmič

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I am writing this column from Kiev, the capital of a country on the verge of collapse, effectively “crucified” between Brussels and Moscow. For three days now, I have closely examined this extremely dramatic and volatile situation. At times, all these traumata remind me of what we saw in Vukovar in the Fall of 1991 and in Sarajevo several months later. Bloody street fights take place, buildings are set aflame, snipers shoot at innocents from rooftops, Molotov cocktails and bombs burst all around. Some hotels have been turned into makeshift hospitals, and the Ukraine Hotel in the Square of Independence downtown now functions as a mortuary wherein the dead are being identified and the death toll is being counted up.

It is difficult to predict how and when this unrestrained sowing of death will end and how many victims will suffer before the Ukrainian nation welcomes the pro-European liberty it desires and the extreme nationalists on both sides are disarmed. My Ukrainian colleagues and friends (there are some Russians among them, too) suggest that I should not simply rely on the official reports with their already terrifying figures of the dead and wounded, for the number of those suffering is in reality quite a bit larger than what is being reported by the media. My former Osijek students (there are 50-something of them in Ukraine) who experienced the sanguine drama of Yugoslavia’s collapse together with us have compared Yanukovych to Milošević, hoping for a rapid and efficacious intervention from Europe and America.

Some people have asked me how I happened to be here at all, in the very epicenter of a massive and partly violent people’s insurgency against a heavy usurpation of power and an even more violent suppression thereof. I have to admit that I too was surprised by dramatic calls I received in Osijek toward the middle of the last week, urging me that I should leave everything else and combine some of my contacts, knowledge, and experience into a small team of inter-
confessional experts in conflict prevention and peace-making. Morally observed, it is impossible to reject the invitations to such a noble mission, though I still had to multiply weigh the fear of my family and other benevolent friends.

A number of these calls were connected to recent encounters in Washington, DC. I have to admit that at the beginning of February, when I socialized with the Ukrainian and Russian politicians and the high ecclesial dignitaries within the framework of the (Inter)national Prayer Breakfast and other events and meetings in Washington, DC connected thereto, we could not have predicted the explosion of violence or the belligerent situation that would follow toward the end of the month. Thus, in the column *Through the Prayer to Peace* you would not find Ukraine mentioned, although we worriedly discussed it and prayed for it a great deal at several places in the U.S. capital.

I considered it an honor when the Ukrainians, whom I have always cherished, invited me on February 5 in Washington, DC to join them in a celebration of their national holiday. Together, we sang Christian hymns and prayed for Ukraine on the square in front of an impressive monument to their giant, Taras Shevchenko. It was a grand encounter and a truly ecumenical event—for there were also Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists and Pentecostals among an Orthodox majority, although the prayer was officially led by the Kiev-based Orthodox patriarch Philaret and the patriarch of the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church, Sviatislav.

In Washington, DC, tremendous attention, in addition to some acrimonious impingements on the Russian side, was attracted by Patriarch Philaret, the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church—Kievan Patriarchate. During informal socializations at a round table, he assured us that a war could not break out because there are Christians who pray to the same God on both sides. Those who protest on the Maidan (there was no lethal violence then) as well as those who are in power believe in God, and all of them, the Patriarch emphasized prophetically, have a sacred obligation to profess their faith by their own deeds. When asked what would happen if there should be an escalation and the baptized Christians mutually start to kill one another (as in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia), the Patriarch stopped for a while before responding to us verbatim: “If someone should claim that s/he is a Christian and s/he kills or issues orders to kill—I ask you what kind of a Christian is s/he then? The murderers will be justly punished sooner or later.” In these talks and in all his public performances, even in front of the politicians and diplomats, the Patriarch insisted
that prayer is the most that Christians can contribute to solve a highly-charged situation which inevitably leads to open confrontation, as it was a reality already at that time.

I have to admit that as a Scripturally-based contemporary theologian, I may not entirely agree with these and similar over-spiritualizations, for they can in fact be a form of escapism, fleeing from realities and changes for which the righteous God cares so much rather than legitimate supplication to God. I am burdened by the question of when a prayer is a true, efficacious dialogue with God and when it instead turns into an expression of superstition born out of spiritual inertia and a mechanically recited rhetoric. Moreover, this kind of distanced spirituality seems to confirm the opinions of those who criticize Eastern Christianity because of its alleged incapacity to be sufficiently outspoken and relevantly engaged in social issues over the centuries.

Some twenty years ago, I personally expounded this sincere ecumenical concern in a discussion with the Serbian Patriarch Pavle—indubitably a saint in many aspects. He surprised me with his attentive listening and his warmth in the comprehension of my benevolent criticism, and especially with his emphasis that we should continue a mutually beneficial dialogue between the ‘activist Protestant West’ and the ‘contemplative East’, as he phrased it.

Of course at this point, one must also levy criticism of the numerous Protestant confusions, disorientation, and failed experiments in this area. In the context of the Ukrainian crisis and tense relations with Russia, I have to express my disagreement with a belated and grossly incoherent statement issued by the Conference of European Churches (CEC). The lukewarm reactions from the ecumenical capital of Geneva are not any more convincing. It is obvious that the tepid reactions within the WCC and the European Council of Churches are an expression of anxiety over the reactions of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is increasingly anti-ecumenical and has unambiguously sided with Putin with regard to this issue, uncritically supporting his megalomaniac plans to restore Russia as a superpower through the creation of an Eurasian Union in order to compete with both the European Union and the USA.

Let us return to the place where I was anxiously meditating on this and other issues of war and peace in a Tolstoy-esque manner. One cannot assert that one only shoots, sets things to fire, destroys and kills without any mention of a prayer on the Maidan. In front of our very eyes, a priest of the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church has just set up a tent chapel jointly consecrated by Roman Catholic and Greco-Catholic priests. This brave spiritual endeavor comes only two days
subsequent to Berkut’s (in this context, the notorious troops of the Ukrainian militia established for the fight against crime) arson of the previous version of an interconfessional chapel that stood next to the Independence Column. A colleague of mine in an improvised new “chapel” reads aloud a spiritually powerful and solidarity-imbued message by the ecumenical (omni-Orthodox) Patriarch Bartholomew. With a bit of irony, I commented that the message would certainly not be read in Moscow and in the Russian Orthodox churches where Bartholomew is not revered as he canonically should be.

As I am writing these lines (Friday around noon), certain signs of provisional hope are emerging for the first time. Europe has indeed learned something from the Yugoslavian tragedy about the high price of an unconsolidated approach and an amoral hesitation. After tedious negotiations by the European Troika with the Ukrainian opposition Troika, and then more through intimidations than the promises, accompanied by a confrontation with Yanukovych, a peace accord has in fact been signed, providing a temporary, fragile hope—although its long-lasting implementation is questionable.

We should not forget that blood was already shed on the Maidan when the Russian Duma, while singing under the conductorship of Czar Putin, hypocritically warned that a “Yugoslavian scenario” should not be repeated in Ukraine and then blamed the Western countries for the bloody confrontations, like the Belgrade-based Milošević did, accusing them for instigating the clashes in order to realize their expansionist geopolitical goals. A few days ago, Yanukovych himself, “bought (off)” and supported in various ways by Moscow, refused all the Western leaders’ appeals to begin serious talks with his political adversaries so as to prevent further violence escalation.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who was now leading the most difficult negotiations of his life, directly and harshly accused Yanukovych on that occasion, whose “refusal to initiate serious talks on a peaceful conflict resolution and implement a constitutional reform is a serious error that might be costly to Ukraine.” Our American friend Joe Biden was even more concrete in his direct telephone threats and public statements in behalf of Obama and the U.S. Government, which has befriended Putin and his satellites for all too long. The Western countries voiced their condemnation in unison: unambiguous and unexpectedly severe. E.g., Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, well-known to us (it seems as if he still learned something
during his dubious engagement in our area), proclaimed President Yanukovych accountable for the dead and the violence in Kiev in advance, asserting that his “hands were bloody.”

A priority these days has been to stop the violence, connected with a search for democratic solutions, while announcing pre-term presidential and parliamentary elections which would hopefully establish a more balanced democratic government. At any rate, many difficult issues to which there are no easy answers remain and Ukraine awaits the times of great uncertainty and heavy turbulences if it aspires to preserve the unity of a deeply divided nation. The Western part of the country, oriented in a pro-European fashion, and the East, oriented in a pro-Russian fashion, will be difficult to reconcile. Putin will not sit peacefully, and the semiautonomous Crimean peninsula, historically connected to Moscow also by virtue of its Russian majority, will probably be the first to launch a secession procedure from Ukraine and its accession to Russia. Thereafter, everything is possible, even some darker Moscow directed scenarios wherein the West, with the exception of sanctions, may not more efficaciously respond without seriously disturbing a series of international relations and endanger peace in this world of ours, already excessively encumbered by instability and wars. Should it take this direction, then as the Orthodox pray, *Lord be merciful to us all!*

As much as I am exhilarated by a (temporary?) cessation of violence and a removal of Yanukovych’s semi-imperialistic powers, I am as much nauseated when pondering over a fact that a peace accord was signed with a man whose hands are bloody and who will sooner or later have to be held accountable for the death of the innocents and his many other evil deeds together with his criminal collaborators, like the Balkan-based Milošević, Karadžić, and their allies. Maybe Patriarch Philaret did “prophesy” in Washington, DC with his assertion that (then still potential) “murderers will be justly punished sooner or later.” Justice is too frequently slow but it eventually arrives, better sooner than later, for there is no peace without justice.