

## Article

# Towards an Orthodox Acceptance of Geopolitical Responsibility: Building an Orthodox Agenda Based on Peace Ethics

Cezar Marksteiner-Ungureanu

The Faculty of Social Sciences, Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas–Angelicum, 00184 Rome, Italy; marksteinc85@pust.it

**Abstract:** Because of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the question about the capacity of the Eastern Orthodox Church to act as a geopolitical actor and to explore its role on the international stage is more urgent than ever. The aim of this paper is to stress the importance of providing an ethics of peace regarding the Ukrainian conflict, following the classical methodology of social ethical research: (1) I begin by paying attention to the context; (2) I then analyse it according to the normative principle of social ethics; finally, (3) I try to respond to the following question: What could be done to improve the current situation?

**Keywords:** Orthodox Church; ecumenism; social ethics

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Following the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the question about the capacity of the Eastern Orthodox Church to act as a geopolitical actor and to explore its role on the international stage is more urgent than ever. The attitude of local Orthodox churches regarding current political challenges reveals huge fractures within Orthodoxy. Due to the different political context of each local Orthodox church, which ranges from dictatorship to democracy, Orthodoxy is divided in its theological response to the social and political questions it confronts (Bremer et al. 2022).

Could the Eastern Orthodox Church play a role in the process of reaching a ceasefire and peace in Ukraine? The Orthodox Church can act either at the ecumenical and pan-Orthodox level or, given that it is the nation's largest NGO, by influencing political decisions at national level. It is precisely the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) that plays such a role, even though it promotes the opposite agenda, legitimating war. The war in Ukraine challenges the *status quo* of Eastern Europe, further spurs the ideological dichotomies of the local Orthodox churches and could lead to more nationalistic conflicts and ecclesial tensions. For this reason, developing an ethics of peace at the international level and of reconciliation at the personal level is the present imperative of the Orthodox Church.<sup>2</sup>

The starting point for this text is the current international situation caused by the Russian aggression in Ukraine and it attempts to stress the social-ethical dimension concerning the role and contribution of the Eastern Orthodox Churches as geopolitical actor and peacemaker. The aim of this paper is to stress the importance of providing an ethics of peace regarding the Ukrainian conflict, following the classical methodology of social ethical research: (1) I begin by paying attention to the context; (2) I then analyse it according to the normative principle of social ethics; finally, (3) I try to respond to the following question: What could be done to improve the current situation both on local and regional level?

## 2. The Context of War, Nationalism, and Legitimation

Since the 24th of February 2022, the Russian Federation has been conducting a major scale military invasion of Ukraine, provoking an armed conflict between the two countries



**Citation:** Marksteiner-Ungureanu, Cezar. 2023. Towards an Orthodox Acceptance of Geopolitical Responsibility: Building an Orthodox Agenda Based on Peace Ethics. *Religions* 14: 1489. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121489>

Academic Editor: Razvan Porumb

Received: 4 August 2023

Revised: 22 November 2023

Accepted: 28 November 2023

Published: 30 November 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

that could escalate in a nuclear disaster (either through a nuclear attack or an explosion at a nuclear plant), and officially annexing territories from the Eastern part of Ukraine, on 29 September 2022. The armed conflict started earlier (2014), through the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the Donbas war, both of them triggered by the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in the same year. Since 2014, the existing tensions and conflicts in the region have grown, reverberating into the ecclesial level through the attempt to create the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2018, independently from Moscow, with the canonical support of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (EP). The ROC perceived this as a canonical invasion of its ecclesiastical jurisdiction. As a result, it broke immediately the Eucharistic communion with the EP. In the same vein, Vladimir Putin—in his address of 21 February 2022—considered the creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as a first step towards the destruction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and used it as argument for justifying the necessity of military measures which started a few days later.<sup>3</sup>

So, the current war in Ukraine represents the climax of accumulated not only political, but also ecclesial tensions between Russia and Ukraine. The incapacity of the local Orthodox Churches to deal not only with the nationalistic tendencies that currently dominate their contexts, but also with the totalitarian experiences of the 20th century still remains a reality. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 2022, Irina Scherbakowa suggested twenty years ago that the insufficient reckoning with the past (*Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit*) will lead to war (Cf. [Gabriel 2022a](#), [2022b](#), [2022c](#)). Should not the Churches have been perhaps the factors initiating such a process of remembering the past? The answer would certainly be to some degree ambiguous because the history and the current situation of Orthodoxy in Ukraine reveal inner-Orthodox tensions, not least its Church's long-term canonical dependency on the ROC, which, in turn—as it becomes increasingly clear—remains in a strong connection to the Russian state. However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991), any imitation in Russia of the Western model of liberal democracy with its so-called 'universal values' has failed, leading to a "failed secular Modernity". The result consists of the establishment of an alternative to the Western model. At its core, as at the core of the war narrative, stands undoubtedly the nowadays intensely discussed teaching of "Russkii Mir", which contains both a strong imperialist dimension (Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine as parts of the same spiritual structure) and the identification of the messianic role of Russia in the world as defender of "traditional values"—as opposed to the Western concept of moral order (which for both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Putin regime is decadent).<sup>4</sup> This type of messianic, eschatological and metaphysical narratives, as Cyril Hovorun notes, has occurred systematically since the beginning of the war, trying to legitimise it ([Hovorun 2022](#)). Related to this connection between state and history, tradition and religion, which is strongly ideologized by Putin's regime, Tamara Eidelman suggests ultimately that the current Russian political regime "can be described as fascist" ([Eidelman 2022](#)).

At the pan-Orthodox level, the Russian aggression in Ukraine reveals the incapacity of the local Eastern Orthodox Churches to articulate an ethics based on peace and reconciliation. Moreover, the ROC supports actively the war in Ukraine, providing the main ideological narrative behind the military conflict. According to the sermon of Patriarch Kirill of 6 March 2022 (Sunday of Forgiveness), the military intervention in Ukraine is more than a "physical war". It is a "metaphysical war" because it is about remaining able to follow God's law. The example of God's law supposedly being violated is the organization of "gay parades" in Ukraine ([Kirill 2022](#)). Further, according to Patriarch Kirill the war is not an offensive, but a defensive one. Russia only defends its borders, claimed Patriarch Kirill in his sermon of 3 May 2022. The legitimacy of war as a good fight, as well as a spiritual fight, also comes up in his sermon on 26 September 2022, in the context of a partial mobilisation of the Russian army, in which Patriarch Kirill affirmed that dying for the country is equivalent to a sacrifice. Such affirmations are not isolated, but they are recurring systematically in Kirill's sermons. The professors of the Saint Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute have argued against Patriarch Kirill's teaching about fighting and dying for the

motherland constituting some sort of “martyrium”: “Every year, the nations of the world commemorate those who gave their lives to defend their country. Even if it is heroic, this gift, however, is not holy and it does not mean that those who died in this manner will have their sins absolved. It is God who forgives sins and not a heroic act, however remarkable it may be”<sup>5</sup>. The distinction between being a hero of the nation and a saint of the Church is crucial for Orthodox theology. The position of the Saint Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute needs an urgent reception at ecclesial level.

In response to the attempts of the ROC to legitimise the Russian aggression in Ukraine, a number of significant Orthodox theologians published, the “Declaration on the ‘Russian World’ (Russkii Mir) Teaching”, which rejects the concept, together with ethno-phyletism, from a theological perspective. Likewise, the document rejects “any Manichean and Gnostic division that would elevate a supposedly holy Eastern Orthodox culture and its Orthodox peoples above a debased and immoral West” (§4). The same position against the active role of the Russian Orthodox Church persists in many open letters issued both by institutions such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), as well as by theologians from different parts of the world. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the president of Germany, stressed in his speech to the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches the responsibility of Christian churches to condemn the war and its nationalistic ideology. Concretely, the Christian delegations at the WCC meeting had the opportunity to demand the Russian delegation to stop supporting the war.<sup>6</sup> This, however, did not happen, raising strong criticism against the leadership of WCC.

The next section of this paper explores the need of the Orthodox Church to become a peacemaker in matters of geopolitics.

### **3. The Orthodox Church as Pacemaker in Geopolitical Context: Political, Theological, and Social Ethical Reflections**

Conflicts are inherent in human communities, and they could easily escalate to armed conflicts. War represents perhaps the biggest injustice that can happen to a community. It has something irrational in it. Nations are fighting each other in order to implement a political agenda, to change existent borders, or even, when war takes a genocidal turn, to annihilate each other. We may ask, then, what could be, in the context of war, the role of the Orthodox Church? In the case of the Ukraine conflict, three aspects are crucial: First, the Russian invasion in Ukraine is the biggest military operation in Europe since the Second World War, albeit not being the first war since then (for instance the Yugoslavian wars between 1991 and 2001, the Chechen–Russian conflict, the Transnistrian conflict, the Russo-Georgian war). Secondly, by invading Ukraine the Russian Federation violated international law (the Helsinki Accords of 1975 and the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of 1994), putting in danger smaller and weaker countries such as the Republic of Moldova, and creating a precedent for China to invade Taiwan. Thirdly, the Russian Federation is a nuclear power capable to use nuclear weapons, putting also in danger the entire world. Because of this danger and on the basis of civil casualties together with the destruction of Ukraine, including critical infrastructure (schools, hospitals, train stations, power plants etc.), this war is, at least from a Christian ethical point of view, certainly unjustifiable.

#### *3.1. Biblical and Theological Approach to Peace*

The problematics of war and peace in the Bible are extremely complex. It is not possible to stress in this article all the dimensions of peace and the development of different peace visions in the Bible. According to Eberhard Schockenhoff, the Bible doesn’t possess a linear progress from a God of anger and wrath in the Old Testament to a friendly and loving God in the New Testament. Although some passages from Sacred texts regarding war/warfare and peace are drawing on violence or war, the significance of peace is crucial in the Bible. Therefore, it is appropriate to speak in the Biblical tradition about an early dominant tendency of overcoming violence (Schockenhoff 2018, pp. 395–499).

As reflected in the Old Testament, the history of Israel has been shaped by a great number of conflicts and wars. These are to be seen in connection with the inherent imperfection of human beings, who are tainted by sin (Gen 11,6). Violence is already present in the first narrations of the Bible, depicted in the fratricide murder in the story of Cain and Abel.

The classical term for war in the Bible is the noun “milchamah”, which occurs 320 times; the term “cherem” that means to “ban”, to “annihilate” (Dt 20:10–18) is important, too: In the context of conquering Jericho, Joshua ordered the utter destruction of the city and annihilation of all captured people, excepting Rahab and her family (Jos 6,21–22). The verb for “making war” is “nilham”, which appears 164 times. In the pre-exile part of Israel’s history, Yahweh is even depicted as a “warrior” (Ex 14,14; 15,3); he helps his armies triumph in battles (see The Song of Deborah, Jud 5,23). God takes part effectively in the battle, drowning the Egyptian army (Ex 15). God is conducting war through Israel against the foreign cult of another people within the territory of Israel, or nations are used to punish Israel for its sins and disobedience (Jes 10,5–6). A mitigation of the warfare in Israel is coming up in Dt 20,1–15, in which certain social categories are exempt from enrolment in the army. In a further step, the victories and defeats of Israel depend on its obedience or disobedience to God’s law. This assumption of warfare is more widespread in the prophetic literature. For instance, the collapse of Judah in 587/6 BCE is the result of its disobedience from the God’s law: “Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem, or who will grieve for you? Who will turn aside to ask about your welfare? You have rejected me, declares the Lord; you keep going backward, so I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you—I am weary of relenting” (Jer 15,5–6).

In the time of prophetic literature the importance of dissociation from warfare is also starting to rise. Messiah is called “Prince of Peace” (Jes 9,6), who will establish in his kingdom a peace for which there “will be no end” (Jes 9,7). Ultimately, Yahweh will make a “covenant of peace” with its people which will be “an everlasting covenant” (Ez 37,26). Peace becomes a central element of the prophet’s vision, and it is integrated in the concept of justice and universalised: „And the work of righteousness will be peace; and the effect of an upright rule will be to take away fear for ever” (Jes 32,17). Having trust in God’s action and intervention in history is actually the appropriate response to the demand for war preparation, armour supply, and military planning (Jes 30,15–17). This is the first strong Biblical narrative of overcoming violence and war. Although wars/conflicts are common in the life of Israel (as ultimately in each community of human beings), they belong to the fallen world and are not idealised. In the Eschaton, peace (*shalom*) will prevail; that means that there will not be any kind of conflict and violence (Jes 11,6–8).

The New Testament essentially embraces these prophecies of a Messiah who brings peace. The birth of Jesus according to Luke represents a cosmic event which in the first instance releases peace on earth: “Glory to God in the highest, and on the earth peace among men with whom he is well pleased” (Lk 2,14). The kingdom of Jesus—even in this world—is not from this world (Joh 18,36), otherwise—says Jesus to Pilate—“. . . my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (Joh 18,36). The kingdom of Jesus is not a physical place, but a spiritual engagement to confess the “truth” (Joh 18,37), “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rm 14,7). To achieve it, an ethics of Christians life is necessary, in which again “peace” is a normative orientation: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rm 12,18). In the Epistle to the Hebrews, God is called a “God of peace” (Hebr. 13,20). In the Deutero-Pauline Tradition, the Gospel of Jesus is summed up by the author of Ephesians as a message of peace: “He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near” (Eph. 2,17). Or: “fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6,15).

Although the New Testament offers a strong narrative of peace, in some passages even calling for strong pacifist attitudes (for example, “love of enemies” in Mt 5,44), there are nevertheless some texts which seem to interrupt the narrative of peace brought by

Jesus. Throughout the history of Christianity, especially in the cases when the Church was instrumentalized by the political power, these passages were used to justify violence and war. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus did not come to bring “peace”, but “the sword” (Mt 10,34). In Luke, Mary’s Song mentions: “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty” (Lk 1,52–53). Last but not the least, the discourse of Jesus from the Book of Revelation to the Church of Thyateira reveals the image of a God still capable of (violent) punishment (Rev 2,23–24).

Thus, it is obvious that there exists in the Holy Scripture a dialectic of peace and war/violence. This dialectic is to be overcome in the eventual state of eschatological peace—peace which can only be achieved partially in history. However, peace remains a fundamental pillar of Christian life. Biblical texts that convey a potentially violent symbolism, or that can be interpreted in an ambivalent manner, are interfering with the peace narrative and represent a significant ethical challenge for Christian theology and the Church.

### 3.2. Liturgical Approach to Peace

The Holy Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church is built on the central idea of earthly anticipation of the eschatological promise of cosmic peace. The Holy Liturgy is a utopia of peace, an anticipation of the eschatological peace promised by the prophets and sung by the angels at the birth of the Child. It represents the hope of a world without violence, which in this world is only partially possible. This should constantly challenge the theology and (social) ethics of the Church.

The beginning of the Holy Liturgy is first of all the Son of God’s bloodless sacrifice, i.e., completely devoid of violence, and it is preceded by the repetition of a verse from the Gospel of Luke that affirms that the birth of the Messiah is strongly linked with a message of peace: “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Lk 2,14). That shows that the Holy Liturgy shares the cosmic mandate of peace, which includes, of course, both the earthly dimension of peace (“...on earth as it is in heaven”, Mt. 6,10), as well as the interpersonal dimension of peace (Mt. 5,9: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” sings the Choir during the Third Antiphon). Already from its beginning, the Holy Liturgy qualifies each attitude of war and violence, putting before the community the image of a reconciled and peaceful relationship between people and God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

In matters of political authorities and army, the text of the Holy Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom asks for peace: “For civil authorities and our armed forces, grant that they may govern in peace, Lord, so that in their tranquillity, we, too, may live calm and serene lives, in all piety and virtue” (*The Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*). It is obvious that the Liturgy legitimises only a peaceful way of governance. In the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great, there are more details regarding the prayer for political leaders and conflicts: “Remember, Lord, this country and all those in public service whom you have allowed to govern on earth. Grant them profound and lasting peace. Speak to their hearts good things concerning your Church and all your people that through the faithful conduct of their duties we may live peaceful and serene lives in all piety and holiness. Sustain the good in their goodness; make the wicked good through Your goodness. [...] Deliver this community and city, O Lord, and every city and town, from ... invasion of foreign enemies, and civil war” (*Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great*). This prayer makes it clear that the Liturgy delivers a crucial function of social criticism, making impossible any kind of legitimisation of the state of war.

Note should be taken of the liturgical paradox in relation to the state of war, especially in connection to the war in Ukraine: On the one hand, Russian clerics support actively (or are forced by the Church hierarchy to express their support for) the war in their sermons, which is against the spirit of the Liturgy; on the other hand, they confess in the Liturgy the purpose of peace, which goes against Patriarch Kirill’s sermons regarding the Ukrainian

war. Perhaps this violation of “liturgical consciousness” is what led to the “Appeal of the Priests of the Russian Orthodox Church for Reconciliation and Cessation of War” ([Clerics of the Russian Orthodox Church Appeal for Reconciliation and an End to War 2022](#)), signed by almost three hundred clerics of the Russian Orthodox Church in spite of the predictably severe consequences from Russian authorities. These official positions of Church authorities in support of the war are revealing once again of the existing hiatus between the spirit of the Liturgy and its ethical implementation. This ambivalence—which extends to include a considerable number of canonised soldiers or war-mongering rulers and emperors—remains an open question in the Eastern Orthodox Church, both throughout its history and today.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Rebooting Ecumenism: Building a Christian Social Agenda Based on Peace Ethics

In Christian theology, as we have seen, living in peace is a high commandment for the life of Christians. Because in liberal democracy the institutions play a fundamental role in generating and preserving justice, the Church as a civil actor (in some countries the most important civic actor) has the responsibility to suggest an orientation for its members regarding such complex theological and ethical issues. The commandment of peace should therefore define not only the private life of the Christian, but also the social dimension of the Orthodox Church as a whole. In this matter, the Orthodox Social Documents “For the life of the World” is stating: “The Orthodox Church, moreover, recognizes and affirms the responsibility of legitimate government to protect the vulnerable, to prevent and limit violence, and to promote peace among persons and between peoples. [...] One of the primary purposes of any government is defence of the lives and welfare of those who shelter under its protection. But government achieves this best when working to reduce violence and to encourage peaceful coexistence, precisely by seeking to institute just and compassionate laws and to grant equal protection and liberty to all the communities over which it may exercise power, including ethnic or religious minorities. The use of force must always be the last resort of any just government and must never become excessive” (FLW §45). Reality reveals indeed an opposite image: Several Eastern Orthodox churches ignore the desideratum of peace, and they support the nationalistic or imperialistic agenda of the state. Regarding the long tradition of “Byzantine Church-State Symphony”<sup>8</sup>, the risk of renouncing the social obligation of the Church in favour of a political agenda is a reality nowadays in Russia and a permanent danger for several other local Orthodox churches. For instance, Patriarch Kirill’s declaration of 18 October 2023 concerning Russia’s nuclear arsenal is highly relevant in this matter: “They [Igor Kurchatov and his colleagues, n.n.] created the weapon under the protection of Saint Seraphim of Sarov because, by ineffable divine providence, this weapon was created in the monastery of Saint Seraphim”<sup>9</sup>. This statement shows the disastrous consequences which an Orthodox leadership subservient to state imperialist ideology can inflict on ethical judgement. It is a responsibility of the other Eastern Orthodox Churches—and in a broader sense of all Christian churches—to criticize and condemn such positions which claim to come from a spiritual and ethical perspective. Regina Elsner emphasizes the lack of fact-based development of themes concerning violence, ideology, acceptance of the war on behalf of the Church, which led to WCC’s failure to establish a coherent theology of peace ([Elsner 2023](#)). The ecumenical task of promoting peace should be therefore taken much more seriously, not only as a present-day challenge for the Churches, but as “raison d’être” of the ecumenical movement.

The Orthodox acceptance of a geopolitical responsibility consists basically in assuming unity of faith not only at the local level, but also at the regional level, expressing common values which should be rooted in the Gospel and in the Church’s tradition. In this context, promoting peace should be on the current geopolitical agenda of all Orthodox Churches. The aim is ultimately an ethical and theological one: on the one hand to provide for the international community a more credible narrative for stopping violence and promoting peace; on the other hand, the Church, as anticipation of the Kingdom, actualizes in this way its worship in history. An Orthodoxy with two different (even opposite) voices is not



only confusing for the others, but also dangerous for the inner Orthodox dynamic, causing polarity and making complicated even the synodality and unity among the local Orthodox Churches. Cyril Hovorun's analysis of the WWC's approach to the war in Ukraine in Karlsruhe in 2022 is eloquent. Through the war propaganda of the ROC, the mission and work of WWC and of its general secretary Ioan Saucă was close to being compromised (Hovorun 2023).

I would therefore like to stress in what follows the local and regional level of an Orthodox agenda based on peace ethics using as a case study the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.1. National Level

The socio-political context of the last couple of years emphasizes a stronger comeback of the selective reading of history. The Covid pandemic has weakened significantly democratic institutions worldwide, leading to an increasing tendency of authoritarianism and distrust regarding international institutions. At the same time, there is the general disappointment of post-communist countries that had hoped for a much better life after the fall of communism and after joining the European Union. This has created a sort of scepticism regarding the imitation of the Western liberal democracy model (Krastev and Holmes 2020).

The rise of populist politics consisting in a very critical stance towards and even the rejection of the positive role of international democratic institutions (using instruments of manipulation such as conspiracy theories, propaganda, and fake news), enforced the idea that the national state is in danger to lose its distinctive identity in history or even to disappear. Thus, affirming and defending national interests and the so-called "traditional values" has become normative for many states, but at the cost of weakening their solidarity with other states (as in the case of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which supports the Russian Orthodox Church's justification of the Ukrainian war). When it comes to socio-political challenges, local Orthodox Churches generally follow the agendas of their respective states, to the point of making their prophetic role in society and in the world a nation-related matter, instead of grounding it in Scripture and in the Tradition of the Church. For instance, despite abundant evidence, only eleven of the sixteen autocephalous Orthodox Churches have so far condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine (Demacopoulos 2022).

The ecclesial nation-wide crisis in Ukraine, involving several competitive Orthodox jurisdictions is still not canonically resolved. Before the Russian invasion in Ukraine, there were at least two major Orthodox Churches with contradictory narratives in the Ukrainian society: on the one side, there was the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), canonically under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, led by the Metropolitan Onufriy (Berezovsky), which shares a narrative of unity with Russia, relating to a common spiritual and historical heritage. The UOC enjoys the canonical recognition of all another local Orthodox churches as part of the Russian Orthodox Church. On the other side, since 2018 there has also been an Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), legitimised and recognised in 2019 by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and then by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa, the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Church of Cyprus, but not by all the other local Orthodox churches. Led by the Primate Metropolitan Epiphaniy (Dumenko), it shares a narrative of independence, of separation from the influence of the ROC in its internal affairs. Although particularly during the war hundreds of parishes belonging to UOC shifted to OCU, the difference in terms of ecclesial infrastructure between OCU and UOC is still in the favour of UOC; in terms of public support of Churches, "the OCU seems to be stronger" (Bremer 2022; Németh 2023).

A significant development of the ecclesial landscape in the Ukraine consists in the attitude of the Primate of the UOC, Metropolitan Onufriy. He has criticised the Russian aggression in Ukraine, distancing itself from the Russian Orthodox Church. As a member of the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations, Metropolitan Onufriy signed on 23 February 2022 an appeal to Vladimir Putin to stop the war<sup>11</sup>, and, on 6 April

2022, a “Statement on the Genocide of the Ukrainian People committed by the Russian Troops in the Kyiv Region”<sup>12</sup>. Finally, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church he leads announced on 27 May 2022 its independence from the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>13</sup> Whether after the war they will return under Moscow’s jurisdiction or they will be united with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine under the jurisdiction of Constantinople is not clear at this time.<sup>14</sup> Anyway, the aim of reaching a ceasefire and peace as consequence of condemning the Russian aggression by all Churches and religions in Ukraine has not brought the expected result. Apart from the common condemnation of the Russian aggression in February 2022 by the UOC together with all religions and confessions of Ukraine, the ecclesial relationship between the UOC and the OCU is governed by a spirit of rivalry and conflict. Therefore, the Orthodox Churches of Ukraine need first of all to reach bilateral peace, reconciliation, and unification.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the common condemnation of the Russian aggression, supported ideologically by the Moscow Patriarchate, the war seems to be decided exclusively on the battlefield, and with a huge cost of human lives. Thus, the Orthodox Churches of Ukraine—as well as the international diplomacy—have been unable so far to bring a substantial political or diplomatic contribution in order to stop the war and to achieve peace. This reveals that the pacifist vision of the Christian Churches may be rooted in an optimism that is not realistic in this case.

As a conclusion, the question arises as to which realistic contribution the Churches could indeed bring on a national level in the present situation? The Russian aggression is certainly not caused by religion, but it is nevertheless legitimised through it. The function of legitimizing and de-legitimizing war remains in this case the most important political instrument of Orthodoxy on a national level. The fight against the Russian war propaganda machine, which is actively supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, and the delegitimization of war at the local level is currently perhaps one of the most important contributions that Orthodoxy—supported on the ecumenical level—could and should bring. Promoting narratives as forgiveness and reconciliation in its society will be one of the most important tasks of all Churches in the Ukraine after the end of the hostilities. Likewise, a major positive role of churches (including the Greek Catholic Church) has consisted until now in the distribution of international material support destined to the Ukrainians affected by the war or more generally supporting the population, as well as in pastoral aid to soldiers and families affected by war.

#### 4.2. Regional Level

On the regional level, it is crucial to notice that until now not every local Eastern Orthodox Church condemned immediately the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Although the United Nations General Assembly has condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine with a strong majority of votes (141 countries voted in favour of this resolution; 35 countries abstained, including China; 5 countries opposed the resolution, namely Belarus, Eritrea, Syria, North Korea, and Russia itself) (United Nations General Assembly 2014), of the 16 local Orthodox churches no less than 5 defend or remain silent regarding the Russian aggression against Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> The only active voice of Orthodoxy outside of Ukraine against the war is the Ecumenical Patriarchate, both through the voice of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and through its document “For the Life of the World” (2020). The social concept of the Ecumenical Patriarchate condemns generally in very strong terms war as “the most terrible manifestation of the reign of sin and death in all things” (§42) and as *ultima ratio* that should also be integrated in an ethical framework: “The use of force must always be the last resort of any just government and must never become excessive”<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, the ROC social document “The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church” (2000) condemns the war as “evil” (Chapter VIII), but under some special circumstances it permits it: “In this regard, the question whether the Church should support or deplore the hostilities needs to be given a special consideration every time they are initiated or threaten to begin” (VIII.3.)<sup>18</sup>. It is obvious that by developing its social



concept the ROC is thus also providing its own benchmark by which to consider when a war is legitimate and when it deserves its support, as is the case nowadays in Ukraine. So, at the first glance, Orthodoxy as geopolitical actor continues to be fractured: Several nations from Eastern Europe are captive primarily to their nationalist past, distinguishing in an artificial manner between “we” (as a specific ethnic group that is always “innocent”, “good” and frequently “disadvantaged” in relation to other ethnic groups or nations) and “others” (other ethnic groups, nations or even sexual minorities that threaten to steal “our” “innocence” and “goodness”). Therefore, the “others” both inside or outside the country are merely put at a disadvantage, through a selective reading of the past and, as we have seen, in an ecclesial context, even through a selective reading of the Bible and Liturgy. In this case, pan-Orthodox relations are massively hampered, and ecumenical statements with are calling for socio-political action are made superfluous (as obviously was the impact of the ROC at the Assembly of WWC in Karlsruhe in 2022).

In order for Orthodoxy to make a more substantial contribution to socio-political issues, and to make her voice better heard across the international community, it needs urgently to establish new ecclesial models in order to reorganise itself on a Pan-Orthodox level. This question is generating much interest nowadays among theologians, who are seeking to identify models at the intersection of synodality and primacy.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, such a synodal initiative was taken at the Council of Crete (2016), when Patriarch Daniel of Romania proposed that the Primates of Orthodox Church should meet regularly, in order to discuss the present theological and political challenges in the region: “During the deliberations of the Holy and Great Council the importance of the Synaxes of the Primates which had taken place was emphasized and the proposal was made for the Holy and Great Council to become a regular Institution to be convened every seven or ten years” (Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, §1).<sup>20</sup> The suggestion was agreed on by the Synod, but was never really implemented, although it is absolutely imperative. The Social document “For the Life of the World” (2020) of the Ecumenical Patriarchate could represent a starting point for a common vision of the world, which could be discussed and adapted in such a regular Institution of the Pan-Orthodox expression of synodality. The major obstacle to such a Synaxis of all Primates is the fact that the local Orthodox Churches are principally oriented to their observance of national agendas, acting according to national sympathies, “captive” to their own statutes endowed with competences only at national level. This attitude must be viewed critically, especially from a social-ethical perspective. On the other hand, the failure to find consensus for establishing an Orthodox synodal system at the Pan-Orthodox level has amplified certain tendencies towards the development of a stronger ministry of primacy at the universal level. The recent example of 2018 of attempting to solve the pastoral and canonical crisis inside Ukraine through the recognition from Constantinople of a new Orthodox Church has not resolved the Ukrainian ecclesial crisis. On the contrary, it has radicalised the ROC. So, this model of primacy certainly does not function more efficiently than the synodal one. It may seem surprising, but it appears that the local Orthodox churches among themselves need nowadays an inner kind of ecumenism.

Due to the lack of a Pan-Orthodox Institution of the Orthodox Church, which should be capable to generate consensus concerning problems with which the Church is confronted, it becomes clear that local Orthodox Churches are acting rather as individual entities. They are not prepared to act as one geopolitical actor, and to share a common vision concerning the world. As a result, the local Orthodox Churches are not assuming common ethical principles, although they should offer a common witness of the Gospel. Ioan Moga is right to affirm that shaping peace cannot be articulated by each confession regardless of the other parts of Christianity, but as an ecumenical task (ecumenism is at its core a project in the service of peace). “Charta Oecumenica” of 2001 should be rediscovered and the engagement of the Churches for peace, reconciliation and justice should be renewed (Charta Oecumenica, III.7. Participating in the building of Europe, III.8. Reconciling peoples and cultures) (Moga 2023). These very different social-ethical positions of the local Orthodox

Churches on the issue of war and its consequences clearly affect ecumenical cooperation. As a result, the potential role of Orthodoxy as a geopolitical actor and potential peacemaker is considerably weakened.

## 5. Conclusions

As the prestigious magazine *The Economist* titled its edition of 12 November 2022, the peace in Ukraine can only be “imagined” at this stage. It is impossible to predict exactly when and under which conditions peace will be achieved in the current conflict in Ukraine. The guiding question of this paper was whether the Orthodox Church could play a substantial role in order to help establish peace in Ukraine and to also explore this question from a socio-ethical perspective and in its ecumenical significance. The war in Ukraine caught local Orthodox Churches unprepared in terms of the need to formulate an ethics of peace, a theology of peace even, which all Orthodox Churches ought to advocate, in order to delegitimise violence and to promote peace negotiations. The conflict in Ukraine has revealed the limits of the current organisational model of Orthodoxy. Each local Orthodox Church must finally accept that although its focus remains predominantly on its national reality—while engaging on occasion in very close relationships with the state—the geopolitical context of each local Orthodox Church’s region can no longer be ignored. It is crucial for Orthodoxy to develop a credible common witness of the Gospel, to engage in the genuine peacekeeping mission of ecumenical dialogue, in order to fulfil its eschatological character in the world: “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21,4). The Church is called to be the antechamber of the Kingdom of God, a “foretaste and experience of the eschaton in the holy Eucharist” (Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, §1), which despite its existence within a particular culture, has to rise above it. The eschatological conscience must be stronger than the nationalistic one. Otherwise, the result is the inability of the Church to speak with a common voice, as in the case of the necessary condemnation of the Russian aggression by the entire Orthodox Church, still a disputed matter to this day. This should be the starting point for a social-ethical ecumenical engagement of the Christian Churches especially in Eastern Europe.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The current form of the article, much improved and expanded, is based on my presentation following the invitation received from Univ. Prof. Mihai-Răzvan Ungureanu, Ph.D. hab., Ph.D.h.c to speak at the International Conference “Geopolitical Challenges of the Russian-Ukrainian War, from the Black Sea to the Arctic Ocean”, 3–5 November 2022.
- <sup>2</sup> I am aware of the large body of literature dedicated to this topic from very different perspectives. Theological scholars with very professional expertise in the study of Orthodox Church are constantly relating about the situation in Ukraine in context of war, too (see, for example, the contributions of Thomas Bremer, Regina Elsner, Thomas Németh and Cyril Hovorun on the war in Ukraine).
- <sup>3</sup> Address by the President of the Russian Federation (2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>, accessed on 1 August 2023.
- <sup>4</sup> Both ideological components, the “Russkiy Mir” and “traditional values”, came up in the last decades and were promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church under the Patriarch Kirill and supported by Putin. See: (Metropolitan 2019). And the essay of Vladimir Putin: (Putin 2021). For a critical engagement with Russian doctrine “Russkiy Mir”, see: (Coman 2023).
- <sup>5</sup> Communiqué du Conseil des enseignants de l’Institut de Théologie orthodoxe Saint-Serge (Paris)—4 Novembre 2022 (2022), <https://orthodoxie.com/communique-du-conseil-des-enseignants-de-linstitut-de-theologie-orthodoxe-saint-serge-paris-4-novembre-2022/>, accessed on 22 August 2022.
- <sup>6</sup> “There are also representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church here today. The fact that they are here is not something we should take for granted in these times. I expect this Assembly not to spare them the truth about this brutal war and the criticism of the role of their church leaders” (Steinmeier 2022).

- 7 See more on this huge complex topic: (Adamsky 2019; Paulau 2023).
- 8 The Byzantine symphony is a widely debated concept. For more details see the following sources, primarily relevant to the field of political theology: (Papanikolaou 2012).
- 9 Patriarch Kirill says Russia's nuclear weapons created 'by divine providence' to keep country 'free and independent', <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/10/18/patriarch-kirill-says-russia-s-nuclear-weapons-were-created-by-divine-providence-under-the-protection-of-saint-seraphim-of-sarov> (accessed on 8 November 2023).
- 10 The socio-ethical analysis of Regina Elsner is worthy: (Elsner 2022).
- 11 Ukrainian Council of Churches Calls on President Putin to Stop the War (2022), <https://vrciro.org.ua/ru/statements/uccro-calls-on-president-putin-to-stop-the-war>, accessed on 2 September 2022.
- 12 Statement on Genocide of the Ukrainian People, Committed by Russian Troops in the Kyiv Region (2022), <https://vrciro.org.ua/ru/statements/uccro-statement-on-genocide-of-ukrainian-people-committed-by-russian-troops>, accessed on 2 September 2022.
- 13 Resolutions of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of May 27, 2022 (2022), <https://news.church.ua/2022/05/28/resolutions-council-ukrainian-orthodox-church-may-27-2022/?lang=en>, accessed on 13 September 2022.
- 14 Thomas Nemetz undertakes a pertinent analysis regarding the unclear status of the UOC (Németh 2023).
- 15 Despite the intervention of Ecumenical Patriarchate in Ukraine in 2018–2019 and formation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the problem of self-identity of the Churches still persists. See the analysis of Myroslava Rap which is still relevant: (Rap 2015). See likewise the pertinent analysis of Regina Elsner concerning the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine after the canonical intervention of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Ukraine in 2018 and 2019 (Elsner 2019).
- 16 The Russian Orthodox Church, the world's largest Orthodox Church, supports and defends the war; The Serbian Orthodox Church supports Russia, avoids using the word "war" in this context, and helps only those Ukrainians who belong to the Moscow Patriarchate. The old Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem remain to this day silent regarding this war. See: (Demacopoulos 2022).
- 17 For the Life of the World. Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church (2020), <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos>, accessed on 22 August 2022.
- 18 The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church (2002), <https://russianorthodoxchurch.ca/en/social-concepts-index>, accessed on 22 August 2022.
- 19 For a current discussion on this topic, see: (Moga 2022).
- 20 Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (2016), [https://www.ecumenism.info/archive/docu/2016\\_great-holy-council\\_message.php](https://www.ecumenism.info/archive/docu/2016_great-holy-council_message.php), accessed on 28 October 2022.

## References

- Adamsky, Dmitry (Dima). 2019. *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy. Religion, Politics and Strategy*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Address by the President of the Russian Federation. 2022. Available online: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828> (accessed on 1 August 2023).
- Bremer, Thomas. 2022. Which Orthodox Church in Ukraine is the Largest? Available online: <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2022/11/09/ukraine-largest-church/> (accessed on 29 October 2023).
- Bremer, Thomas, Alfons Brüning, and Nadieszda Kizenko, eds. 2022. *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations? The Conflict in Ukraine as Expression of a Fault in World Orthodoxy*. Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Clerics of the Russian Orthodox Church Appeal for Reconciliation and an End to War. 2022. Available online: [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1yOGuXjdFQ1A3BQaEEQr744cwDzmSQ1qePaaBi4z6q3w/viewform?edit\\_requested=true](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1yOGuXjdFQ1A3BQaEEQr744cwDzmSQ1qePaaBi4z6q3w/viewform?edit_requested=true) (accessed on 26 August 2022). (In Russian).
- Coman, Viorel. 2023. Critical Analysis of the Moscow Patriarchate Vision on the Russian–Ukrainian Military Conflict: *Russkiy Mir* and Just War. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 76: 1–13. [CrossRef]
- Communiqué du Conseil des enseignants de l'Institut de Théologie orthodoxe Saint-Serge (Paris)—4 Novembre 2022. 2022. Available online: <https://orthodoxie.com/communiqué-du-conseil-des-enseignants-de-linstitut-de-theologie-orthodoxe-saint-serge-paris-4-novembre-2022/> (accessed on 2 August 2023).
- Demacopoulos, George E. 2022. The Orthodox Response to Putin's Invasion. From Complacency to Clear Condemnation. Available online: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/orthodox-response-putin-invasion> (accessed on 3 August 2023).
- Eidelman, Tamara. 2022. Putinism as the New Fascism. *The Wheel* 30: 15–18.
- Elsner, Regina. 2019. Friedensstifter oder Konflikträger? Der Krieg in der Ukraine als sozioethische Herausforderung für die Orthodoxen Kirchen. ZOIS Report 2/2019. Available online: <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/friedensstifter-oder-konflikttraeger-der-krieg-in-der-ukraine-als-sozioethische-herausforderung-fuer-die-orthodoxen-kirchen> (accessed on 16 November 2022).
- Elsner, Regina. 2022. Toward an Orthodox Social Ethos? Socio-Ethical Negotiations in Ukrainian Orthodoxy. In *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations? The Conflict in Ukraine as Expression of a Fault Line in World Orthodoxy*. Edited by Thomas Bremer, Alfons Brüning and Nadieszda Kizenko. Berlin, Bern and Bruxelles: Peter Lang, pp. 97–120.

- Elsner, Regina. 2023. Frieden im ökumenischen Dialog mit der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche. *Religions & Gesellschaft in Ost und West* 3: 18–21.
- For the Life of the World. Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church. 2020. Available online: <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos> (accessed on 22 August 2022).
- Gabriel, Ingeborg. 2022a. Die Ablehnung der westlichen Weltordnung und die hybride Weltsicht Russlands. *Die Presse*. March 1. Available online: <https://www.diepresse.com/6105935/die-ablehnung-der-westlichen-weltordnung-und-die-hybride-weltsicht-russlands?from=rss> (accessed on 25 October 2022).
- Gabriel, Ingeborg. 2022b. Pazifismus in der Krise? Lehre und Praxis der Kirchen in Europa angesichts des Ukrainekrieges Theologische Kurse, May 25. Wien. Available online: <https://www.theologischekurse.at/site/veranstaltungen/calendar/12945.html> (accessed on 4 August 2023).
- Gabriel, Ingeborg. 2022c. Sich Aggressoren auszuliefern, ist keine ethische Haltung. *Deutscher Ordern*, 3–8.
- Hovorun, Cyril. 2022. Russian Church and Ukrainian War. *The Expository Times* 134: 1–10. [CrossRef]
- Hovorun, Cyril. 2023. Can “Ecumenism as Usual” be Possible in the Wake of the War in Ukraine? *Ecumenical Ends* 52: 25–31.
- Kirill, Patriarch. 2022. Patriarchal Sermon on Holy Week after the Liturgy in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. March 6. Available online: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. 2020. *The Light that Failed. A Reckoning*. London: Penguin Books.
- Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. 2016. Available online: [https://www.ecumenism.info/archive/docu/2016\\_great-holy-council\\_message.php](https://www.ecumenism.info/archive/docu/2016_great-holy-council_message.php) (accessed on 28 October 2022).
- Metropolitan, Hilarion. 2019. “Russia—Ukraine—Belarus: One Spiritual Space” (Fribourg, Switzerland, 1st June 2019). Available online: <https://mospat.ru/en/news/46324/> (accessed on 20 October 2022).
- Moga, Ioan. 2022. Synodality as Syncephaly? A Plea for a Pastoral-Participative Renewal of the Pan-Orthodox Practice of Synodality. In *Orthodoxy in Two Manifestations? The Conflict in Ukraine as Expression of a Fault in World Orthodoxy*. Edited by Thomas Bremer, Alfons Brüning and Nadieszda Kizenko. Berlin, Bern and Bruxelles: Peter Lang, pp. 193–207.
- Moga, Ioan. 2023. Das Friedenpotenzial der Orthodoxen Kirche(n)—Hoffnung trotz allem? *Religion&Gesellschaft in Ost und West*, 9–11.
- Németh, Mark Thomas. 2023. Der Krieg gegen die Ukraine und die Kirche. Anfragen an die Theologie. *LIMINA* 6: 236–37.
- Papanikolaou, Aristotle. 2012. *The Mystical as Political. Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 55–85.
- Paulau, Stanislau. 2023. An Icon’s journey from Kyiv to the Pacific: Russian Colonial Wars and Orthodox Piety in the Early 20th Century. *SUBBTO* 68: 221–35. [CrossRef]
- Putin, Vladimir. 2021. On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. July 17. Available online: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (accessed on 20 October 2022).
- Rap, Myroslava. 2015. *The Public Role of the Church in Contemporary Ukrainian Society*. Baden-Baden: Aschendorff Verlag, pp. 78–94.
- Resolutions of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of May 27, 2022. 2022. Available online: <https://news.church.ua/2022/05/28/resolutions-council-ukrainian-orthodox-church-may-27-2022/?lang=en> (accessed on 13 September 2022).
- Schockenhoff, Eberhard. 2018. *Kein Ende der Gewalt? Friedenethik für eine globalisierte Welt*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder.
- Statement on Genocide of the Ukrainian People, Committed by Russian Troops in the Kyiv Region. 2022. Available online: <https://vrciro.org.ua/ru/statements/uccro-statement-on-genocide-of-ukrainian-people-committed-by-russian-troops> (accessed on 2 September 2022).
- Steinmeier, Frank-Walter. 2022. 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Available online: <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2022/220831-VV-OeKR.html> (accessed on 14 November 2022).
- The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church. 2002. Available online: <https://russianorthodoxchurch.ca/en/social-concepts-index> (accessed on 22 August 2022).
- Ukrainian Council of Churches Calls on President Putin to Stop the War. 2022. Available online: <https://vrciro.org.ua/ru/statements/uccro-calls-on-president-putin-to-stop-the-war> (accessed on 2 September 2022).

**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.