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# THE DANGEROUS CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL; RELIGIOUS AND MORAL IDENTITIES IN THE UKRAINIAN WAR

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## ABSTRACT

The Russian invasion of Ukraine violates fundamental norms of international law and is at the same time an attack on the order of values of liberal democratic societies. The long prepared, ideologically based aggression was massive underestimated. In the foreground of the war are not rationally comprehensible interests, but identity-related conflicts of recognition with their very own grammar of uncompromisingness and power dynamics. For Russia, Ukraine and Europe, the scholarly reappraisal of the highly divergent identity constructions is of central importance. The theological critique of a nationalist-identitarian-political use of the Christian faith is an important peace service that the churches have to perform.

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**KEYWORDS:** *Ukrainian war, construction of identities, manipulation of public opinion, geopolitics, Russian world, metaphysical struggle for values, Orthodox Social Teaching, Encyclica Fratelli Tutti*

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The brutal war of aggression on Ukraine, which the Russian president personally pushed forward without any external cause, was not only a violation of the territorial integrity of a sovereign nation but at the same time an attack on the order of values of Europe and the United Nations. The people of Ukraine are resisting Russian superiority with great determination, sacrifice, and the irrepressible courage of despair. Under this impression, a wave of worldwide solidarity was formed, underpinned by political, economic, and cultural sanctions. Russia massively harms itself by attacking Ukraine and is punished with international isolation by the great majority of the nations (but not by China and India). However, the unity of the international response should not obscure the fact that the assistance as a whole has a mixed record: The sanctions are driving Russia into dependence on China and could drive a new division of the world into hostile blocs. Russia finds enough customers for its gas and oil even without Germany and earns massively from the increased prices. Russia's military power does not show the expected superiority, but it is by no means broken.

The European public should have been vigilant much earlier. Already for many years and recently bundled in his essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" (July 12, 2021), the President of the Russian Federation, who is quite ambiguous in rewriting of Russian history, has denied Ukraine's right to exist as an autonomous state and declared a Russian hegemony (Luchterhandt, 2022). The cause of war is ultimately the dangerous mixture of a religious, morally charged and nationalist identity construction that is anti-western. At least this is what the new "symphony" between the State and the Church, or President Putin and Patriarch Kirill, is claiming as the legitimization of the war (cf. Kirill 2022). As we see in retrospect, it was negligent not to take the threat more seriously. Given Mr. Putin's offensive contempt for international law and his explicit goal of weakening European unity, it was irresponsible to depend on Russian energy supply and to indulge in the illusions of an appeasement policy that President Putin has exploited in order to systematically expand his regime's power on international scale and overtly and covertly destabilize Western democracies.

It is painful for the European public to watch idly as the Ukrainian people's very existence is threatened and to realize that it will foreseeably have to endure even more immeasurable suffering and possibly the loss of its sovereignty. However, it remains prudent for the NATO and the United States not to intervene directly in the conflict. Not least because of uttered threats of nuclear expansion of the conflict, this would have incalculable risks worldwide that would be irresponsible to take. In Germany the special fund of 100 billion euros, planned to be given by the federal government to the Bundeswehr as an additional budget is a necessary step so that we will not be completely helpless in the future if our own country is threatened. It is also ethically compelling in order to be able to make the necessary contribution to a new security architecture after the war in Ukraine. The cross-party consensus on this, which came about quickly even though it requires the Greens and the SPD to leave behind outdated peace policy convictions, is also to be welcomed from the perspective of Christian peace ethics. However, it will take a long time before the German military is sufficiently equipped to meet the complex new challenges, and beyond money, it needs new impulses that are forward-looking in terms of strategy and peace policy, as well as a strengthening of European cooperation (cf. Zebis 2018)). A necessary component of the new security architecture is to increase energy resilience and reduce vulnerability to cyberattacks.

As professor of Christian social ethics I ask myself how much my reflections in the field of peace ethics of the past years as well as the guidelines of Catholic social teaching are still worth in view of the new threat scenario. Some ethical theories were characterized by the idea that war in Europe was merely a phenomenon of the dark past. A view that, from today's perspective, must be considered naive and outdated. The experience of the last few weeks has revealed a gap in the ethical debate, which forces us to quickly make up for these theoretical deficits and to give peace and security ethics a much greater weight within theology as well. The peace-ethical consequences of being a Christian in a fragile world need to be explored anew. However, there are also aspects of Christian peace ethics that seem topical, especially in the light of recent events, and are worth recalling. The conviction, for example, that the decisive threat to our peace is being negotiated on the eastern borders of Europe, and that the people there are on the front lines defending our values of freedom, human rights, tolerance, and democracy (Biser, 2003), motivated me to become involved in Ukraine many years ago. The example of the current war teaches us painfully that democratic values must be defended proactively and existentially, because authoritarian regimes and parties have been gaining strength around the world for roughly a decade. Media manipulations through post-factual forms of communication show their contempt for the truth. Today it is clearer than ever: We need a democracy that is able to defend itself both internally and externally.

Papal teaching letters also contain aspects of current relevance. In the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, which Pope Francis published in October 2020 (Pope Francis, 2020), and which was unjustly hardly perceived as an encyclical on peace (cf. Vogt 2021b), the pope pointed out forcefully and with foresight that world peace was

acutely endangered. He saw the "policy of isolation" in its many manifestations as a portent of the gradual slipping into the danger of a third world war. Even the possession of nuclear weapons, and even more so the threat to use them, he judged to be morally reprehensible. In my opinion, his pacifist rejection of any kind of warfare does not stand up to the necessity of defensively opposing the excesses of armed violence and aggression (cf. Vogt, 2021b). At present, however, our hands are largely tied for direct military intervention, which would make NATO a party to the war outside its alliance territory and therefore include the risk of a worldwide escalation of the conflict up to a nuclear confrontation. The threshold for this has become lower due to the variety of "small" nuclear weapons.

The encyclical also contains considerations that can point the way, especially now, in the arduous search for ways out of the spirals of violence. It begins with a sober analysis of the situation: War is "not a ghost of the past, but has become a constant threat" (FT 256). According to Pope Francis' assessment, the end of the Cold War was not sufficiently used to create lasting peace and to advance the architecture of a new world order through, among other things, UN reforms. The guiding standard for the pope - as it was for John Paul II - is the principle of the human family, which commits to cross-border fraternity, relativizes the category of the nation and must be secured through a defense of universal human rights.

Christian peace ethics can be summarized under the paradigm of *Just Peace*, on which the German bishops published a groundbreaking paper in 2000 (Die deutschen Bischöfe, 2000). According to this, weapons alone can win a war, but never bring peace. What is also needed is the constant vigilance and early recognition of violence and human rights violations wherever they occur in everyday life. Diplomatic and civil society initiatives of resistance at all levels (Schellhammer and Goerdeler, 2020) are equally indispensable as well as a demythologization of supposed justifications of war through nationalist identity constructions (cf. Vogt 2022). Where democracy and the rule of law are weakened and the (semi-)public is manipulated in the digital world, early criticism is needed, as nationalist-aggressive thought patterns can emerge in their shadows. *Just Peace* also includes avoiding generalizing images of the enemy, and always seeking anew the power of reconciliation. *Just Peace* is not a pacifist paradigm, but a broadening of the view to the diversity and interconnectedness of military and civil society arenas of the struggle for peace and security (cf. Bock et al. 2015; Vogt, 2020).

In the struggle for peace and security, each player can and must make its own specific contribution. Each has a different radius of action, which indicates the possibilities for action.

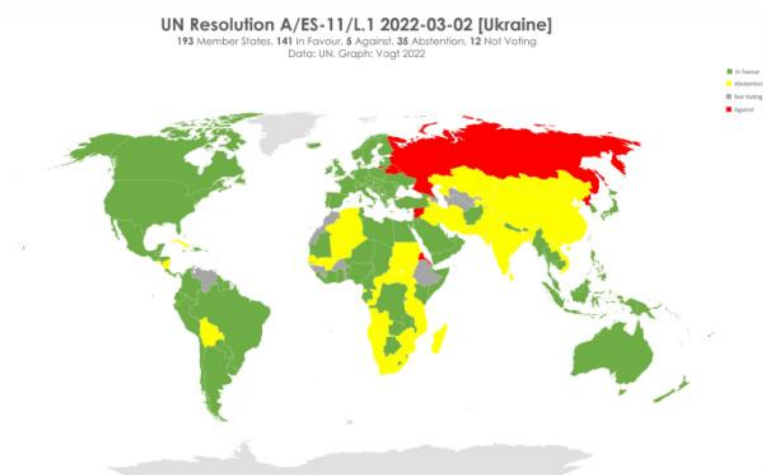
From the outside, i.e., through the direct intervention of other states, President Putin can only be stopped to a very limited extent. More importantly, it will depend above all on the behavior of the Russian people. The public criticism of the war of aggression by 7,000 Russian scientists, who describe it as unjust and senseless (Jungblut, 2022) and thus take a high personal risk, is a sign of courage. The DFG has decided - as an example for many other scientific organisations - to suspend all joint funding projects with Russia and at the same time support scientists who have been persecuted (DFG, 2022). It is a difficult balancing act to send unequivocal signals of protest at the academic level on the one hand, but not to let the dialogue break down on the other. Science is not value-neutral and must take a stance on the war. This also applies to the European Academy of Arts and Sciences.

A weighty voice could also come from the Russian Orthodox Church, whereby a distinction must be made between the official church (i.e., Patriarch Kirill as well as the majority of his bishops) and parts of the church base (Fetko 2022). Patriarch Kirill wants even more than Putin to force Kiev into the Russian state structure, because Kiev has a high symbolic value for him as the center of Russian Orthodoxy. The concept of a "Russian World" or the first draft of it did not come from President Putin's pen, but was written among others by the patriarch (Rocca 2022). On March 6, 2022, to legitimize the war, he preached that Ukrainians had been oppressing and killing Russians in the Donbass for eight years, and that the liberation of Russians living there and a defense of the Orthodox world against the influence of the supposedly morally decadent West as a "metaphysical fight" were imperative (cf. Kirill 2022). Of the Orthodox Church's faithful, on the other hand, many on social media are asking Ukrainians to forgive them for the war that is bringing much suffering upon them (I would like to thank my Ukrainian doctoral student Michael Fetko for oral information on this). After all, the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine did not oppose the demonstrators during the Maidan revolution in 2013 (Andrakhovych, 2014). This was an important sign of hope.

However, the intra-Orthodox conflict is deep. By declaring the independence (autocephaly) of Ukrainian Orthodoxy and supporting it through Patriarch Bartholomaios (cf. Butler 2022), Kiril sees his claim to power and primacy threatened. In 2000 and 2008, the Russian Orthodox Church published a social doctrine that can be read - at least in Patriarch Kiril's interpretation - partially as a declaration of war against human rights, democracy, and Western values of freedom, and which differs significantly from the pan-Orthodox social

doctrine „For the Life of the World“ published in 2020 under the leadership of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople (cf. Wissenschaftliche Enquete der Stiftung PRO ORIENTE, 2003, esp. 25-33; Orthodox Times, 2020). Patriarch Kiril is very close to President Putin. He sees his role as supporting him in the war against Ukraine to the best of his ability. According to his understanding of the “symphony” between State and Church, he will never criticize President Putin. Conversely, the Russian Orthodox Church also has a key importance for Mr. Putin. In the end, it is a religiously or mythically underpinned identity-political illusion (Vogt 2022) to which the Russian president adheres as a supposed justification for the war and which he and Kiril propagate. Religious enlightenment is necessary. It would be a liberating blow of inestimable effect if as many Orthodox believers as possible would emancipate themselves from this and profess the primacy of peace as a central Christian duty. Many bishops have already removed Patriarch Kiril from the High Prayer, which, according to Orthodox understanding, is tantamount to a denunciation of communion (Die Tagespost, 2022).

International forces have been barred from direct influence through military intervention, but they have not remained inactive. The economic, financial, sporting, scientific and cultural sanctioning of Russia at all levels could have a far-reaching effect on Russian society through the comprehensive variety of measures. It may not stop the violence immediately or in the short term, but it will weaken what until recently was Putin's strong support in Russia and around the world. Russia's isolation in the UN General Assembly was an important signal of new global unity among the international community in defense of human rights and the right to state sovereignty. But by no means all states currently support the isolation of Russia (see map).



World map showing the UN vote on Ukraine: large parts of the world voted with green, but by no means all (Source: Matthias Theodor Vogt)

It remains to be seen how India, which is dependent on Russian arms supplies, will behave, and how China will act, which, in view of its own genocidal human rights violations against the Tibetans, the population of Inner Mongolia and the Uyghurs, shies away from condemning Russia and which could massively weaken the effect of the sanctions through financial and economic cooperation with Russia. President Putin has too often experienced that economic interests have made many players overlook his actions, which are contrary to international law. This was the case with the annexation of Crimea and the covert low-intensity war in the Donbass, as well as with his support for criminal dictators like Assad in Syria or Lukashenko in Belarus. Freezing Russian accounts in Swiss banks was an important step. But Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT payment system has so far been only half-hearted. Europe must accelerate the energy turnaround and reexamine the tensions between energy security, climate protection and social compatibility in order to quickly become independent of Russian gas.

European societies are making their solidarity clear through a high level of neighborly assistance. The willingness to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine and to openly welcome the growing influx of migrants - especially in Poland - is overwhelming. However, in the light of the immeasurable suffering and military atrocities in Ukraine, this is cold comfort. It is a bad sign that, after its voluntary renunciation of nuclear weapons in the Budapest Memorandum (1994), Ukraine must experience now being so helplessly at the mercy of violence and not receiving sufficient protection from the international community. It would have required, for example, precautionary action on the part of Germany to supply defensive weapons and food depots for the large cities that are now being surrounded, as well as assistance with military training.

The challenge of these days makes clear that it is not just a matter of taming the flagrant war and ending the suffering and death in Ukraine. Rather, it is a beacon of current upheavals that demand intense ethical reflection. We live in a time of multiple crises and accelerated change in a multipolar world that is increasingly characterized by a highly complex "evolution of violence" (Münkler, 2017). In the process, familiar patterns of order in politics, the economy and society are losing their validity, without the future order already being discernible. In response to the resulting uncertainty, the striving for security and resistance to crises on the part of individuals and societies is becoming a central ethical and political goal. At the same time, global society cannot remain indifferent to changes in the international order. Not every change is to be tolerated. Such behavior would be a misunderstanding of tolerance. What is necessary is to observe tolerance in its three basic dimensions (Vogt and Husmann, 2021) in all changes: Passive tolerance as a fundamental renunciation of violence and the effort to resolve conflicts primarily by means of diplomacy. Active tolerance as the defense of human rights and freedoms, which can also mean providing military support, because democracy must be strongly defended. Proactive tolerance aims to save spaces of dialogue and trust between peoples. It wants to expand exchanges and mutual understanding between civil societies and, last but not least, religious communities.

Since the Ukraine conflict is part of a multi-layered struggle for a new world order, it cannot be resolved in the long run without the creation of an international peace and security order appropriate to today's challenges and lines of conflict. The reform of the Security Council, which no longer adequately reflects the balance of power in the world and is misused or blocked by the powerful as an instrument of unilateral dominance policy by means of their veto power, is of primary importance here. The partial withdrawal of the U.S. as a world power has created a vacuum that must be compensated for by a consolidation of the manifold supranational linkages (Schockenhoff, 2018, 639-665). This could also include a European Security Council to increase the EU's ability to act. The various institutions involved in security policy (including the UN, NATO, OSCE, and the EU) must be coordinated in a complementary manner.

Lasting peace requires forgiveness and reconciliation, including with one's own history. The historical dimension of today's conflicts is made clear by the fact that narratives that clash with history have been used to construct a rationale for war. It is clear from these narratives that the Russian president and a probably significant part of the Russian population lack reconciliation with the disintegration of the USSR (Rocca 2022). The sense of grievance from perceived degradation and non-recognition as a world power is the driving force behind the current aggression. Given the disastrous consequences of the Ukraine war for everyone, including Russia, which is harming itself more than anyone else could have done, the grievance is initially intensified. Overcoming it will certainly take a long time. Here the Churches and religious communities have an original task, since reconciliation always has a religious dimension (Vogt, 2021a). At the same time, it is also highly relevant socially and politically.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is ultimately about reconciliation between the different values, cultural mentalities and political models on the borders of Europe. However, where regimes systematically deny truth, freedom and humanity, they have no moral legitimacy. For Russia, Ukraine, and Europe, the scholarly reappraisal of the highly divergent identity constructions and the role played by religions in them is of central importance (Golczewski, 2018). Rationally comprehensible interests are not in the foreground, but conflicts of recognition with their very own grammar of uncompromisingness and power dynamics. The theological critique of a nationalistic claim on the Christian faith is an important peace service that the churches should perform (Vogt 2022; Fetko 2022). Being a Christian in the face of a world order that has become fragile requires a considerably higher degree of commitment to the values of peace, freedom and reconciliation than we have been accustomed to in the security-addled German world of the past decades.

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