

Chapter 8

FAITH-BASED POLITICS? THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND THE WARS IN YUGOSLAVIA AND UKRAINE

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Abstract: *The World Council of Churches (WCC) is an international faith-based organization whose mission is to provide a forum for ecumenical dialogue. The political background of the activities of the WCC during the Cold War was well-researched in literature. However, the political behavior of the WCC after the Cold War, in the new international conditions, remained relatively unexplored. This article aims to contribute to the debate about the position of faith-based organizations in political disputes. It presents a comparative analysis of the actions of the WCC in the conditions of the Yugoslav and Ukrainian wars. Both cases represent significant international crises with a significant role of the Orthodox churches that are members of the WCC (the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church). The content analysis and discourse analysis were applied in all articles, official statements, and chronicles published in the official journal of the WCC, *The Ecumenical Review*, for the period of crises (1991–1999; 2014–2023). A comparative analysis of the actions of the WCC in the conditions of the Yugoslav and Ukrainian crises showed that the WCC has the ability to achieve faith-based politics, which mainly refers to maintaining a certain degree of political autonomy and the character of a forum for inter-church dialogue and not catalyzing political conflicts.*

Keywords: *World Council of Churches, war in Yugoslavia, war in Ukraine, faith-based organization, religion and politics.*

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Introduction

The World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded at the beginning of the Cold War, during the Berlin blockade and the Iron Curtain's fall in Europe in 1948. It was part of the Marshall Plan and, initially, of the Truman anti-communist front (Kirby 2001). At the end of the Cold War and the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe, there was a flare-up of nationalism, followed by the rise of mass religion. The war in Yugoslavia was one of Europe's first conflicts in the 1990s, with a crucial religious dimension. At that time, the WCC experienced the 'quo vadis' question in the changed global circumstances: "[I]t is clear that the 'end of the Cold War' is a momentous change for an organization like the WCC, whose history so often bears the marks of that geopolitical conflict" (Castro et al. 1991 p. 1). The peak of the institutional crisis was the problem with the Orthodox churches questioning their membership in the WCC.

After the major crisis with the Orthodox churches had been overcome, a new one arose as a result of the war in Ukraine. However, it is no longer just a question of the relations among the Orthodox churches, but a new Cold War dynamics that is spilling over into the relations in the Orthodox world. Hence, how the WCC will deal with the new challenges is not a question of religion, but of politics. In the war context, the politics of religious organizations should primarily be directed towards peace negotiations and mediation because religious actors have significant political and social legitimacy and leverage to influence the conflicting parties (Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana 2009). On the other hand, religious organizations are actors in international relations that tend to preserve their status and achieve their interests. The WCC is no exception to this. Therefore, the topic of this paper is how the WCC tackles political crises in which its member churches are involved or targeted.

1. Theoretical Framework and Research Design

There are many ways in which religion can be implicated in conflict and peace, resulting in that there is "no single, elegant theoretical model enabling us to deal adequately with all relevant cases of religion's involvement in contemporary conflict, peace-making, and peace-building" (Haynes 2019, 645). The reason for that is the ambivalence of religion, which especially comes to the fore regarding faith-based organizations (FBOs). According to Jeffrey Haynes (2019: 646), the FBOs, as actors in international relations, can be either "angels of peace" or "warmongers". Some FBOs, like Al-Qaeda, overtly advocate political violence. However, in recent times, FBOs have frequently advocated for peace and mediation (e.g., the Roman Catholic Church). Moreover, especially in Christianity, ecumenical FBOs are a shift from centuries of religious wars and intolerance.

This paper is not intended to contribute to the just/unjust war debate in Orthodoxy (for that theme, see e.g. Clapsis 2010). It attempts to contribute to the literature on the politics of international religious organizations or FBOs (Berger 2003; Haynes 2001, 2019; Lehmann 2016). Although “God’s century” (Toft et al. 2011) has brought a flourishing of religious international and non-governmental organizations in the world,⁷ their role in political conflicts has not been sufficiently addressed. The role of FBOs in war, peace-making, and peace-building processes is based on the fact that religious actors can have significant political and social legitimacy and leverage to influence parties in conflict (Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana 2009). On the other hand, war can directly affect FBOs, especially if the members are somehow involved or targeted in the conflict. This is the case with the WCC during the wars in Yugoslavia and Ukraine. However, the WCC showed a different attitude than some member churches and state actors in international relations.

With 352 member churches representing approximately 580 million Christians, the WCC is among the world's most essential FBOs. Since it has been involved in politics from its foundation, papers on this topic primarily concern the WCC’s politics during the Cold War (Bouwman 2022; Cвиic 1979; Јовић 2016; Kirby 2001; Kunter 2015, 2019; Kaplan 2019). However, the political behavior of the WCC after the Cold War, in the new international conditions, has remained relatively unexplored. Authors who approach it from the view of theology and ecclesiology point out that the propagation of nationalism by the churches is a direct violation of the principles of the ecumenical movement. Therefore, it is claimed that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) “by its stance on the war in Ukraine has made it hard to see the lordship of Christ and has thereby dismembered itself from the ecumenical community” (Clements 2023, 254). If this theological argument is correct, why did the WCC not expel the ROC from its membership? Why did it not do the same with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) during the war in Yugoslavia? What does this tell us about the position of the WCC in the conditions of the post-Cold War political crises in which its member churches are involved?

In order to find the answer to these questions, we shall apply the comparative method. There are several reasons for choosing the cases of the war in Yugoslavia and the war in Ukraine. First, both wars have a significant religious dimension. In both cases, the Orthodox churches that are members of the WCC are stigmatized by

⁷ About 10% of all NGOs in the world have a religious background, while half of that number have Christian roots (Lehmann 2016: 35).

the world as warmongers. Second, in both cases there were requests from some member churches to expel these churches from membership. Third, both cases represent internationally significant post-Cold War conflicts, which allows us to see the character of the WCC as an actor in international relations after the Cold War.

Content and discourse analysis will be applied in the research. The data source is all official announcements and statements of WCC representatives related to the subject of the investigation. Also, we shall analyze all the editions of *The Ecumenical Review*, the official journal of the WCC, which publishes, in addition to scientific and academic articles, all relevant documents, statements, and the WCC chronicle. The time frame of the research is, for the first case, the period 1991–1999, and, for the second case, the period 2014–September 2023.⁸

2. War in Yugoslavia

From the very beginning of the WCC, the relationship between the SOC and this organization was determined by political circumstances. The WCC was part of the Marshall Plan (Kirby 2001). As part of this U.S. foreign policy project, the WCC distributed significant material and financial aid to Yugoslavia, collected mainly by the humanitarian organization the Church World Service, founded in 1946. Aid was delivered through the Yugoslavian Red Cross to local churches (primarily Orthodox and Protestant) from 1948 to 1964 (Archives of Yugoslavia, 1948–1964). Due to the start of the Cold War in Europe and the blockade of Berlin, the ROC made the decision not to participate in the work of the Founding Conference of the WCC in Amsterdam in 1948, which was followed by the other Orthodox churches from the Eastern Bloc, as well as the SOC. However, when the conflict between Stalin and Tito emerged in 1948, and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform, the SOC turned to full cooperation with the WCC.

The SOC joined the WCC on January 1, 1965. This was preceded by the process of de-Stalinization in the USSR and the rapprochement of the ROC with the WCC (Jović 2016). In those years, the WCC was already active in decolonizing Third World countries, even sending extensive financial aid to left-wing guerilla groups, leading to it being considered a left-wing organization (CIA, 1983, 1988). Moreover, the WCC itself expressed an exceptional interest in Yugoslavia and the SOC, which was confirmed by the visit to Belgrade at the highest level (of the General Secretary and Secretary of the WCC) in 1950, 1952, and 1964 (Archives of Yugoslavia, 1948–

⁸ The war in Ukraine is still ongoing at the time of the writing of this article (August–September 2023), but the WCC has taken a clear stance on the ROC's membership in that organization that will not likely change soon.

1964). After the meeting of the Orthodox churches in Rhodes in 1964, the Orthodox churches that were not members of the WCC decided to change this. Finally, at the instigation of the state authorities of socialist Yugoslavia, i.e. the Federal Commission for Religious Affairs, the Holy Bishops' Council of the SOC decided to join the WCC (Jović 2016).

At the very beginning of the 1990s, the WCC Central Committee, at the meeting in Geneva in March 1990, welcomed "the developments in Central and Eastern Europe which are bringing in new liberties and processes towards participatory democracy to many countries including the Soviet Union, Hungary, Poland, the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia" (WCC Central Committee 1990: 349-350). However, at the 7th Assembly of the WCC in Canberra, in 1991, General Secretary Emilio Castro (1992: 120) noted that he "see friends coming from Yugoslavia in the middle of a latent and real civil war". In the works published in *The Ecumenical Review* during the war on the territory of the former Yugoslavia in 1991–1995, it is only sporadically mentioned, together with other previous and current conflicts in the world that affect Christians (Ferris 1992; Goltz 1993; Ichiyo 1994; Jacques 1994; Leite 1993; Liveris 1994). At the height of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the 2nd issue of 1994 published an article that talked about the war in Yugoslavia in the context of violence against women, in which the Orthodox churches are accused of not participating in what was supposed to be a general protest against violence against women in the world (Liveris 1994).

At the meeting of the WCC Central Committee in Johannesburg in 1994, it was only stated that the WCC Central Committee paid "careful attention particularly to the following current concerns and issues: former Yugoslavia, Armenia-Azerbaijan, South Africa, Sudan and the Horn of Africa, Haiti, Angola, Rwanda, Equatorial Guinea, El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Pacific and Guatemala" (Keshishian 1994, 219). In the report of General Secretary Konrad Raiser, published in April 1994, it is noted that ecumenical teams (in cooperation with the Conference of European Churches) visited Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia, as well as other conflict-ridden areas (Albania, the Baltic countries, Bulgaria, Georgia, Ukraine). However, Raiser (1994: 232) adds that "special mention should finally be made of the efforts towards reconciliation with regard to the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and between Armenia and Azerbaijan, carried out in close collaboration with the Conference of European Churches". Elizabeth Ferris (1994), immigration and refugee program director of the Church World Service, emphasized the connection between humanitarian assistance and the peace process, citing the examples of Bosnia, Liberia, and El Salvador.

In a statement from Colombo titled *Ethnicity and Nationalism: A Challenge to the Churches*, issued on November 19, 1994, the seriousness of the situation in the war zones was emphasized:

Conditions seem ripe for more Bosnias, Rwandas or Sri Lankas, for more cities and villages to be destroyed, for more people to be left destitute, for more blood to flow. Along with other concerned groups, the church of Jesus Christ must reflect on this issue. And we must act (WCC, 1995: 225).

The second issue of *The Ecumenical Review* in 1995 was dedicated to religion, identity, and nationalism. However, there is only one author who dealt with the Yugoslavian problem. Miroslav Volf, an American Protestant theologian of Croatian descent, was the first to publish a work in *The Ecumenical Review* during the war on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, in which the topic of war and theology is directly dealt with. Nevertheless, he primarily relied on his idea of “a theology of embrace”, which should overcome the division between “us” and “others”. In this regard, Volf (1995) questioned what he considered negative Croatian and Serbian social phenomena:

Belonging without distance destroys: I affirm my exclusive identity as Croatian and want either to shape everyone in my own image or eliminate them from my world. Distance without belonging isolates: I deny my identity as Croatian and draw back from my own culture. But more often than not, I become trapped in the snares of counter-dependence. I deny my Croatian identity only to affirm even more forcefully my identity as a member of this or that anti-Croatian sect. And so an isolationist “distance without belonging” slips into a destructive “belonging without distance” (p. 198).

Territory should be pure: Serbian soil must belong to Serbs, cleansed of all non-Serbian intruders. We want our world to ourselves, and so we create a monochrome world without “others”; we want to be identical with ourselves, so we exclude “others” (p. 201).

The first official message addressed to the churches in the former Yugoslavia was published in the *Declarations on Public Issues*, issued by the WCC Central Committee in Geneva in 1995. The message states that the WCC, together with the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops’ Conferences, regularly followed and visited churches affected by the war and even organized meetings with the Muslim community in Bosnia. Nevertheless, this

message indirectly mentions the role of the churches and some church leaders during the war. Although it is not stated which churches are meant, it undoubtedly refers primarily to the SOC and the Roman Catholic Church:

The churches of the former Yugoslavia cannot control the military powers, but some do have influence in their respective societies. The narrowly nationalist tone and content of positions taken by some church leaders, however, have increased tensions between the communities and given rise to controversy in the wider ecumenical fellowship (WCC Central Committee, 1996: 119).

The direct accusation of churches and some church leaders of nationalism, which deepened the divisions during the war, did not remain without consequences within the WCC. Dissatisfaction among the Orthodox members soon flared up. We see a hint of this in the article by Ioan Bria from the Romanian Orthodox Church, the former executive director of the WCC program unit on unity and renewal. Bria (1996: 206) wrote: "Many of the WCC's statements – for example those on the former Yugoslavia – are determined by geo-strategic considerations". The WCC Central Committee made a slightly more moderate statement at the meeting in Geneva on September 12–20, 1996:

The role of churches in any situation of ethnic conflict is always difficult and often ambiguous. Many churches themselves are caught in inter-ethnic conflicts. In some cases they have for centuries been the avantgarde of their peoples' struggle for survival and self-determination (WCC Central Committee, 1997: 100).

At the time of the most serious accusations made against the Serbs by the world, the Swiss and German Protestant churches demanded that the SOC be expelled from the WCC (Powers 1996). However, the WCC Central Committee did not agree to such a thing. Moreover, the WCC Central Committee took a moderately pro-Serbian position by questioning the achievement of justice by the ad hoc International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY):

Frequently during this period resort has been had to law as a political instrument to punish those perceived to be the enemy, but it has rarely contributed significantly to the resolution of a conflict or the healing of the deep wounds of history. The international tribunals hastily established to identify and try those charged with crimes against humanity in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda have been perceived to lack impartiality and thus effectiveness. Some have suggested that such special judicial bodies are too susceptible to the politics of the moment, and that they should be

replaced by a permanent international criminal court endowed with authority to assure fair, consistent and equitable administration of international law (WCC, 1997: 280).

In summary, in the researched period from 1991 to 1999, the SOC was not directly accused in *The Ecumenical Review*, in scientific papers, or in institutional statements. Particular churches and church leaders were indirectly accused of nationalism that encouraged intolerance. However, a more moderate claim was made that the position of churches in war conditions is complex and that often the churches themselves are victims of war events, and not warmongers. By criticizing the impartiality of the ICTY, the WCC indirectly supported the positions represented by Serbia. The Serbs were stigmatized by the world and accused of 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia. Although some member churches demanded that the SOC be expelled from the WWC due to the entire Yugoslav crisis (Jović 2016), the WCC did not accept such a position in their public statements. Therefore, it can be concluded that the WCC took a moderately pro-Serbian position during the Yugoslav crisis.

Nevertheless, at the session of the Holy Synod of Bishops in May 1997, the SOC decided that it "will no longer be an organic member of this organization" (Букашиновић 2005, 377). At the same time, the Synod of Bishops of the ROC decided to convene an all-Orthodox meeting where further participation in the WCC would be deliberated, which was also supported by the SOC. At the all-Orthodox meeting in Thessaloniki in 1998, it was pointed out that "the current structure of the WCC makes meaningful Orthodox participation increasingly difficult, and for some even impossible" (WCC, 2006: 2). That is why the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation was formed at the 8th Assembly of the WCC in Harare in 1998. Only the Bulgarian and the Georgian Orthodox Churches finally left the membership, while the other Orthodox churches remained.

3. War in Ukraine

On the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the ROC in 1948, the Russian Patriarch Alexy I issued a document rejecting the WWC (Jović 2016). However, the tremendous geopolitical turn of the WCC took place in the 1960s with the promotion of human rights, freedom, and social justice, as well as the establishment of the Program to Combat Racism in 1970, which donated considerable funds to anti-colonial movements in the so-called Third World countries, many of which inherited their ideas of socialism and were close to the Soviet Union. According to Jeffrey Kaplan (2019: 33), "[a]fter 1961, the Soviets saw the group as a useful conduit for propaganda messages as designed by the Active Measures program that designed

and disseminated Soviet propaganda throughout the Cold War“. Finally, the ROC became a member of the WWC in 1961.

The 11th Assembly of the WCC in Karlsruhe in 2022 was opened by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who compared the wrong path of anti-Semitism of the German churches during the time of Hitler and the path of the ROC in the context of the war in Ukraine:

The heads of the Russian Orthodox Church are currently leading their members and their entire church down a dangerous, indeed blasphemous path that goes against all that they believe. They are justifying a war of aggression against Ukraine – against their own and our own brothers and sisters in the faith. We have to speak out, also here in this room, in this Assembly, against this stance, this propaganda targeting the freedom and rights of the citizens of another country, this nationalism, which arbitrarily claims that a dictatorship’s imperial dreams of hegemony are God’s will. (...)

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. (...)

The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church has aligned itself with the crimes of the war against Ukraine. This totalitarian ideology, disguised as theology, has led to the complete or partial destruction of so many religious sites on Ukrainian territory – churches, mosques, synagogues, educational and administrative buildings belonging to religious communities. No Christian who is still in possession of their faith, their mind and their senses will be able to see God’s will in this (Steinmeier 2022).

It is not the first time a member church has been directly accused of supporting war and crimes (i.e. the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa during the Apartheid). However, it is unusual that there were numerous requests to expel the ROC immediately before the 11th WCC Assembly in Karlsruhe, among which were requests from some member churches. At the initiative of the Acting General Secretary, Dr. Rev. Ioan Sauca (Romanian Orthodox Church), the WCC Central Committee did not expel the ROC. The decision was made unanimously. In his explanation, Dr. Sauca provided an important explanation towards the relationship between church members and the politics they support:

If it was not for the theological reasons mentioned in its basis, WCC did not exclude anybody unless they excluded themselves. This was even the case of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, which supported and argued theologically for apartheid. That created strong debates and condemnations from other WCC member churches. In the end, it was the church that “excluded” itself from the WCC as she felt she did not belong there anymore. But it was not the WCC that suspended or excluded the DRC (Sauca 2022b).

Furthermore, Dr. Sauca insisted that representatives of two Ukrainian churches, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, be invited to the assembly. This was done despite the fact that both churches were not members of the WCC, due to Dr. Sauca’s conviction that “the WCC is a free space for dialogue, and we come together not because we agree with one another but because we disagree” (Werner 2023, 20).

The crisis in Ukraine boiled over in 2014. This was emphasized by the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’ Kirill at the meeting with Dr. Sauca on October 17, 2022, in Moscow. He said he had sent letters to the WCC but with no response:

Eight years ago there were first Ukrainian shellings of Donbass. Destroyed houses, heavy casualties – that’s the reality. More than 2 million refugees from that area found refuge in Russia. Personally, I wrote three letters during those years to the political and religious authorities of the world, including WCC, and asked to intervene that the problems be solved through dialogue and mediation and to avoid killings and destructions. I had no concrete answers and such requests were met with total silence (The Russian Orthodox Church – Department for External Church Relations, 2022).

On the other hand, at the meeting on June 15-18, 2022, the WCC Central Committee stated that “the various initiatives [were] taken by the WCC and its members and ecumenical partners with regard to the situation in Ukraine, dating back to before the initial crisis of 2014, and especially since the invasion on 24 February 2022” (WCC Central Committee, 2022). Indeed, Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, the WCC General Secretary at the time, said on March 3, 2014, that the WCC “is deeply concerned by the current dangerous developments in Ukraine. The situation puts many innocent lives in grave jeopardy” (Kirill 2022). Patriarch Kirill reminded Dr. Sauca of that statement in his letter of March 2022, with which he tried to show that this war did not start recently but that it had long-term causes and that it represented a conflict between the East and the West, not between Russia and Ukraine (see Kirill, 2022).

In the new letter to Patriarch Kirill, Dr. Sauca wrote that he was “aware that it is not in your power and authority to stop the war or to influence those who have such powers of decisions. But the faithful are waiting for a comforting word from Your Holiness. They think that if you come out with a public statement and request, as the spiritual father of so many millions of Orthodox in both Russia and Ukraine, that might have an impact” (Saucu 2022a).

Without hesitation, the WCC Central Committee condemned the war in Ukraine as “the illegal and unjustifiable war inflicted on the people and sovereign state of Ukraine” (WCC Central Committee, 2022). The WCC Central Committee did not condemn the ROC in its statement. Moreover, it praised the ROC’s efforts to engage in dialogue on Ukraine within the WCC:

We acknowledge and welcome 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, though circumstances prevented them from taking part in either of the two ecumenical roundtable meetings so far convened (WCC Central Committee, 2022).

In the second ecumenical round table on Ukraine, on June 10, 2022, the participants from the WCC and the European churches, without the ROC, rejected “the apparent instrumentalization of religious language by political and church leaders to support an armed invasion of a sovereign country” (WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, 2022). It is a somewhat different approach compared to Dr. Sauca, who told Patriarch Kirill that he knew Kirill had no power to stop the war or influence those who had such power (Saucu 2022a). Under the mandate of the WCC Central Committee, Dr. Sauca said at the meeting with Patriarch Kirill on October 17, 2022:

We value the Russian Orthodox Church. It is one of the biggest Churches of the WCC. And all of us would like to see that the Russian Orthodox Church continue to be a part of it because your contribution over the years was very important for the ecumenical movement and also for the Orthodox unity (The Russian Orthodox Church – Department for External Church Relations, 2022).

Moreover, it is a radically different approach towards the ROC as compared to many churches in the West. During the debate at the 11th Assembly of the WCC in Karlsruhe, the proposed text of the statement on the war in Ukraine caused fierce comments, both from the Western Protestant churches, as well as from representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

(Moscow Patriarchate), and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Most of them were not satisfied with the vagueness of the statement (Peränen 2023). However, the adopted proposal remained acceptable enough for the majority of members and remained on the same course as the June 2022 announcement of the WCC Central Committee (WCC 11th Assembly, 2022).

The current WCC General Secretary, Rev. Prof. Dr. Jerry Pillay, visited Patriarch Kirill. In the interview after the visit, he explained the current position of the WCC regarding its member church:

(...) But also, more importantly, the Russian Orthodox Church is one of the largest members of the World Council of Churches. So, we have a right and an obligation to visit with him, to listen to them, and, of course, to even challenge them on their particular positions as related to the war (World Council of Churches, 2023).

Both Ukrainian churches aspire to membership in the World Council of Churches. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine has already submitted a request, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is waiting for a resolution of the crisis in Ukraine (Bortnyk 2022; Yevstratiy 2022). After the state confiscated churches and monasteries from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) and handed them over to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine for use, it seems that the membership of any of them would cause conflicts within the WCC. That is why the General Secretary, Prof. Pillay, called all three parties (two Ukrainian churches and the Russian Orthodox Church) to a new round table in the second half of 2023 (Pillay 2023). Thus, the WCC shows caution in its actions, especially towards the Russian Orthodox Church, and confirms its character as a forum for dialogue.

Conclusion

The most significant crises in the WCC came from the Orthodox churches. Although after the crisis of the 1990s, when the Bulgarian and the Georgian Orthodox Church left the WCC, it is much more significant for the international position of the WCC that the ROC and the SOC remain as members. From the WCC point of view, it is of utmost importance that the ROC remains in the WCC despite the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's membership application. Why is it important to keep the ROC? The reasons are not only related to this church's size or political influence.

The way the WCC approached the question of the role of the ROC in the war in Ukraine is related to maintaining the position of a bridge between the East and the West. While, for example, the Conference of European Churches is more and

more pro-Western oriented (with the admission of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and the exit of the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches), the WCC tries to maintain the character of an all-Christian forum for dialogue. The character of that dialogue was explained by Dr. Sauca when he said that “we come together not because we agree with one another but because we disagree” (Werner 2023, 20).

As the war in Ukraine showed that the Orthodox world is significant for establishing a new international order, the WCC is once again faced with the old question from the time of the Cold War: where to go next? If the ROC were to cease to be a member of the WCC, it would be a significant loss for the WCC. It would thus, first of all, lose its legitimacy in terms of the notion of political autonomy. Of crucial importance is the fact that the WCC is currently the only forum where two warring currents in the Orthodox world permanently meet and negotiate: Moscow and Constantinople. This was not the case even at the all-Orthodox Council in Crete in 2016.

On the other hand, the logic of the WCC’s political behavior in this dispute is expressed by Prof. Pillay with three points: to visit them, listen to them, and challenge them. These three points were also present during the war in Yugoslavia regarding the SOC. Hence, it can be said that they form the backbone of the WCC’s faith-based politics during political crises in which their member churches are involved. Faith-based politics is how the WCC, as an FBO, achieves soft power in both ecumenical and international relations.

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