

War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region

"War in Ukraine, Peace and Justice in the European Region", statement by the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany

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"For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father." (Ephesians 2: 14,17-18)

The 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is meeting in Karlsruhe, Germany, under the theme "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity". The theme guides delegates and participants to take seriously the call for unity in Christ and to live as people of Christ's reconciliation, with God and with one another.

The war in Ukraine

As we meet in Karlsruhe, tragically, we are witnessing a war afflicting Europe. The thoughts and prayers of all participants in the 11th Assembly of the WCC are focused on the people and country of Ukraine, and the tragic consequences they have and are suffering since the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, in

addition to the thousands of casualties including many civilians in the East of the country and hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced people since 2014.

During this six month period, there have been over 13,000 Ukrainian civilian casualties and cities such as Mariupol have been laid in ruins. At this moment close to 14 million people – almost one-third of the entire population of Ukraine – have been forced to flee their homes (according to UNHCR). Moreover, there are many reports of atrocities that may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, including sexual and gender-based violence, as well as greatly heightened vulnerability to human trafficking. In addition, we are very concerned about the risks of catastrophic consequences resulting from damage caused to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant by military activities in its vicinity - as well as containment security at the site of the Chornobyl disaster of 1986.

At its meeting in June 2022, the [WCC central committee deplored the war](#) as “illegal and unjustifiable”, lamenting the awful and continuing toll of deaths, destruction and displacement, of destroyed relationships and ever more deeply entrenched antagonism between the people of the region, of escalating confrontation globally, of increased famine risk in food insecure regions of the world, of economic hardship and heightened social and political instability in many countries.

This Assembly **strongly affirms** the position expressed by the central committee, and **denounces** this illegal and unjustifiable war. As Christians from different parts of the world we **renew the call** for an immediate ceasefire to halt the death and destruction, and for dialogue and negotiations to secure a sustainable peace. We **appeal** to all sides in the conflict to respect the principles of international humanitarian law, including especially with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, and for the humane treatment of prisoners of war.

We also **strongly affirm** the central committee’s declaration that war is incompatible with God’s very nature and will for humanity and against our fundamental Christian and ecumenical principles, and accordingly **reject** any misuse of religious language and authority to justify armed aggression and hatred.

We **urge** all parties to withdraw and refrain from military action in the vicinity of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant and other such locations that may risk unimaginable threats to current and future generations.

We **join in praying** for all the victims of this tragic conflict, in Ukraine, in the region and throughout the world, that their suffering may cease and that they may be consoled and restored to lives of safety and dignity, and we **assure** them of the love and accompaniment of the WCC global fellowship of churches. We **commend** the local churches, specialized ministries and all humanitarian organizations that are supporting the suffering people in all parts of Ukraine and beyond, and who are receiving and caring for refugees in full respect for their God-given human dignity fleeing from the war.

As the central committee meeting in June observed, the WCC has a critical role to play in accompanying its member churches in the region and as a platform and safe space for encounter and dialogue in order to address the many pressing issues for the world and for the ecumenical movement arising from this conflict. We **underline** the calling and obligation of WCC members to seek unity and together serve the world.

The presence of church representatives from Ukraine and the delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church, together with delegates and participants from WCC member churches and ecumenical partners from elsewhere in Europe and from all regions of the world, has served both as a practical opportunity for that encounter. We **commit** ourselves to an intensified dialogue on the issues that divide us – a core purpose of the WCC. For the issues raised by this conflict are indeed deep and fundamental, both for the ecumenical movement and for the wider world, and warrant intensive and sustained dialogue to address.

In the meantime, we **reiterate** the central committee's appeal to our Christian brothers and sisters and to the leadership of the churches in Russia as well as in Ukraine, to raise their voices to oppose the continuing deaths, destruction, displacement and dispossession of the people of Ukraine. We **call** on WCC to provide a platform for all voices for peace to be heard and amplified and **we pray** that this war will come to an end very soon.

The task of post-war recovery will be arduous and lengthy, with huge humanitarian, financial and ecological costs. Churches **are called** to play a key role in the healing of memories, reconciliation and diaconal care. We **recognize** that in war there are no 'winners', and that no one should ever resort to war.

In response to increased militarisation, confrontation and weapons proliferation, we **call** for a much greater investment by the governments of Europe and the entire international community in searching for and promoting peace, and in

strengthening non-violent conflict resolution, civil conflict transformation and reconciliation processes, rather than in escalating confrontation and division. We **call** upon the WCC, together with its member churches, to continue its approach of clarity and dialogue, we encourage round tables and other formats which can contribute to finding solutions to the conflict and its repercussions. We **commit ourselves** to uphold our responsibility to hold one another accountable for maintaining the bond of unity in Christ.

Migration, xenophobia and racism

Christ's reconciling love calls us to recognize and welcome our neighbours. Drawing upon the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), in response to the question, "Who is my neighbour?", we have heard and received Jesus' call to show compassion and mercy to all who are hurt or suffering, without exception or discrimination. We use our resources, our voices, and our sense of empathy to respond to the cries of all who call for healing and wholeness. We are strengthened for this ministry and witness by Jesus' teachings and example, recognizing that he himself experienced the necessity to flee from those who sought to kill Him, beginning at His birth. By Christ's command, we show compassion for all who seek refuge and asylum

Migration is an inherent feature of the human condition. It belongs to the whole history of humanity and the entire biblical narrative. However, in the period since the 10th WCC Assembly in Busan, new and persistent conflicts, oppression and persecution, accelerating climate change, development-induced displacement and spiralling inequality have driven unprecedented numbers of people to leave their homes and to undertake journeys of desperate risk and danger to seek safety and better life elsewhere. Many of them have lost their lives. We **affirm** that we will remember them.

We stand firmly in the conviction, that the international protection of refugees and migrants should be based on need and respect for equal dignity of every human being – independent of origin, religion, ethnicity, or orientation of the persons concerned – as is laid down in international and EU legislation. That conviction requires the promotion of equal treatment and elimination of disparity and discrimination based on racism and 'othering' and ensuring respect for the equal human dignity of people from all regions.

We **affirm** the legal obligations and moral principles that require a compassionate and welcoming response to people in need. We acknowledge and respect the prerogative of sovereign states to define arrangements for the

control of their own borders and the conditions of entry and stay. At the same time, we **expect** all states – in Europe and around the world - to honour the letter and spirit of their obligations under international law, including human rights and refugee law and especially the right of asylum, or risk jeopardizing the very principles and protections established to respond to such crises and to which all should be entitled. We affirm the statement from the Vatican-WCC conference in September 2018 that “[t]o raise national boundaries and the nation state to an order of value above the recognition of the image of God in every refugee and migrant is a kind of idolatry.”

We consider it legally and ethically inadmissible for states to abdicate their responsibilities for saving lives and providing protection, or to seek to ‘outsource’ them to other states and territories. We consider it unacceptable if people in vulnerable positions and who leave their countries aiming for a safer future, are instrumentalised by governments or others for political reasons or their own selfish goals. We also question the logic of a ‘closed-door’ ‘fortress’ mentality before addressing the challenges posed by high and increasing levels of movement of people. We **urge** all states to provide for safe, regular and accessible pathways and opportunities for human mobility in compliance with international humanitarian and human rights obligations, and to take proper measures against the abuse of the vulnerability of migrants and refugees. It is in the absence of wider channels for legal and secure migration that people-smuggling flourishes. We **call** on churches and states to strengthen and extend projects for safe passage like the “humanitarian corridor” initiatives and search-and-rescue services in the Mediterranean.

We **call** for better coordination, cooperation, solidarity and respect for human rights in Europe’s response to refugees and migrants, including fairer sharing of responsibility within the EU. Solidarity with those seeking protection, with those hosting them and between churches should be the guiding principle. And we **appeal** for increased regional and international cooperation in addressing the root causes driving the forced displacement crisis, including especially violent conflicts, the accelerating climate emergency, extreme poverty and lack of development, and the oppression and persecution that force people to flee from their homes.

We **lift up and affirm** the example given to their societies and their governments by the many churches and related organizations that actively engage in welcoming the “stranger”, the refugees and the migrants, especially in contexts in which refugees and migrants are increasingly stigmatized, discriminated against, criminalized, marginalized and excluded.

We **affirm** the God-given human dignity of all refugees and migrants. Based on that understanding we **urge** WCC member churches and ecumenical partners, together with all people of goodwill, to promote a more open and welcoming approach to the “stranger”, and to the neighbour in need and distress. This approach promotes a culture of hospitality, challenges us to reflect theologically on hospitality and fellowship with “strangers”, and leads us to help receive and care for refugees and migrants.

The Assembly **encourages** the WCC to continue exercising a convening role, and creating spaces for encounter and dialogue on migration with member churches and partners for the sharing of information, solidarity, advocacy and accompaniment. The revitalization of the WCC global ecumenical network on migration should be considered in this context. We further encourage closer coordination and cooperation with the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) and ACT Alliance in advocacy and action, particularly in relation to follow up to the UN [Global Compacts on migration and refugees](#) and upholding the 1951 Refugee Convention. Consideration should also be given to how the WCC might support member churches and their specialized ministries in addressing human trafficking, especially of refugee and migrant women and children, including by facilitating networking between churches and partners in countries of origin and those in countries of arrival.

As Jesus has challenged and blessed us with an expansive understanding of neighbour, we commit to these calls for action as our response to his charge, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:37).

Background (for information)

1) The war in Ukraine

One of the many tragic consequences of the war in Ukraine is the greatly intensified militarization, confrontation and division on the continent of Europe, with an enormous and largely uncontrolled proliferation of weapons in the region, and a renewed and escalating threat of nuclear conflict which would cause a catastrophe of appalling and likely global magnitude. A new dividing line is being drawn across the continent, bristling with arms on either side. The history of the Cold War period gives us a clear picture of what may follow, and the risks it will entail.

There is a danger that the invasion of Ukraine could lead to other cases of larger countries seeking to conquer smaller neighbours on the pretext of national

interests. Given the inevitable human cost, war must be avoided and churches have a key role in advocating for this. Despite past failures, multilateral diplomacy – especially through the United Nations at the global level – retains a vitally important role in preserving peace.

Meanwhile, increased government spending on defence inevitably means that there is less money available to spend on poverty alleviation, social protection, health, education, climate action and sustainable development. Inevitably, the poorest will be most affected. Whilst warfare is directly destructive, the social and economic consequences of militarisation cannot be overlooked. So many people are suffering in other places in this world from the effects of this war. The skyrocketing cost of food and the energy crisis in the wake of the war are plunging people into hunger and misery. The global humanitarian impacts of the war in Ukraine were underlined by the WCC [Executive Committee at its meeting on 30 May-2 June 2022](#).

2) Migration, xenophobia and racism

In Europe, migration has become the focus of political polarization and humanitarian crisis, through the conflicting currents of hyper-connected globalization and populist nationalism. The responses by European countries to migrants and refugees have raised serious concerns regarding human rights, and challenged the mission and prophetic role of the churches. All too often the response by governments and societies of European countries in which suffering people have sought safe haven has been one of fear, of rejection and exclusion. All too often, political actors have sought to galvanize public concern and to increase fear for political advantage. Longstanding and fundamental principles of international humanitarian law have been questioned and undermined, including the right of asylum – the fundamental principle that all people fleeing from conflict and persecution are entitled to seek international protection regardless of nationality, ethnicity, religion, health status or any criterion other than need. Churches have in many cases opened doors and hearts and worked toward a culture of hospitality and welcome. However, we confess that some churches have failed to follow the Christian calling to welcome the stranger.

The WCC had contributed to the development of the UNHCR document [‘Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders’](#) (2013). Throughout the period since the Busan Assembly, the WCC and its governing bodies have given serious and sustained attention to this matter, through solidarity visits to refugees and host communities, through consultations among church leaders and governmental and UN partners, through cooperation with [ACT Alliance](#) and

with the [Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe](#) (CCME), through major conferences (such as the WCC-UN conference on '[Europe's Response to the Refugee Crisis, From Origin to Transit, Reception and Refuge](#)' in Geneva on 18-19 January 2016, the Vatican-WCC '[World Conference on Xenophobia, Racism, and Populist Nationalism in the Context of Global Migration](#)' in Rome on 18-20 September 2018, and the '[Global Forum for Faith Action for Children on the Move](#)' organized jointly with World Vision International and other leading faith-based organizations in Rome on 16-19 October 2018), through public policy statements by WCC governing bodies, and through advocacy.

As the 11th Assembly meets in Karlsruhe, there are currently 281 million migrants globally, and those who have been forcibly displaced have risen to 84 million. Since 2011, more than six and a half million people – from Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Eritrea, as well as other countries – have sought asylum in Europe. Many people in need of protection arriving at EU and other European borders have faced pushbacks, detention, long delays in asylum procedures, and increasingly discriminatory and unfair laws governing their right to apply for asylum. The situation at the Mediterranean Sea remains a great tragedy. Hundreds of people – children, women, and men – drown in the sea. Others fall victim to human trafficking before reaching the shores of Europe.

Since the invasion of Ukraine more than seven million people fleeing the fighting crossed EU borders, with more than one million people in a single week. Many of them have been generously welcomed by volunteers, civil society, churches and governments across Europe and beyond. This hospitality deserves our appreciation and praise. However, this work of solidarity is put in question in some European countries, where refugees fleeing Ukraine of African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Roma origin have experienced discrimination. This happens at border crossings where access to transportation is often denied, at refugee facilities and camps both by state officials and aid organizations. International protection should be based on need – independent of origin, religion, ethnicity, or orientation of the persons concerned – as is laid down in international and EU legislation. The welcome received by European refugees from Ukraine is reflective of Europe's broader approach to migration. The double standards are striking.

Russia has also received large numbers of refugees from Ukraine. We are aware of reports of Ukrainian refugees in Russia who have experienced dehumanizing and degrading treatment of interrogation, tortures and loyalty tests at the filtration camps. This warrants further examination by the ecumenical movement. We appreciate the work that churches, religious organizations and volunteers in Russia are doing in support of the refugees from Ukraine.

We consider it unacceptable if people in vulnerable positions who leave their countries aiming for safety and a future, are instrumentalized by governments for political purposes. We observe this worrying development especially in Europe. For many years, European governments have been trying to externalize their responsibility to protect to countries outside of Europe, while sealing off the EU's external borders ever more tightly. In doing so, member states and European agencies as Frontex are not only undermining core principles of international law, the Geneva Convention and European law, but often blatantly violating the law. This policy follows the calculation of deterrence: the greater the suffering, the fewer new refugees arrive. This assumption is not only wrong, but has severe, often deadly consequences for those seeking protection.

Thousands of people die in the Mediterranean every year because European governments have stopped providing rescue and use every means at their disposal to obstruct civilian rescue at sea. At the external land borders of the EU – like at the Bosnian-Croatian border or in the Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Melilla – massive and systematic police violence is used against those seeking protection. People who have managed to cross the Turkish-Greek border or the Aegean Sea, are deliberately exposed to destitution, unlawfully detained in camps or pushed back to Turkey. Several people died in the winter of 2021, when the Belarusian Regime brought thousands of asylum seekers to Europe, where they ended up trapped helplessly in the forests at the EU-border. And more and more people drown in the attempt reaching the United Kingdom by crossing the Channel due to non-assistance. Such violations of the law by states must never become acceptable and go unpunished. We are deeply worried about this erosion of refugee law and the ongoing political efforts to criminalize those, who help refugees and show the solidarity, that is so much needed.