



Resisting Empire, Promoting Peace: Churches Confront the ‘Russian World’ Ideology

Conference Statement

Preamble

From 1-3 December, 2025, about 90 church leaders, representatives of Churches and National Councils of Churches, ecumenical partners, and scholars gathered in Helsinki, Finland, for a conference on ‘Resisting Empire, Promoting Peace. Churches Confront the Russian World Ideology’, organised by the Conference of European Churches in collaboration with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Orthodox Church of Finland.

The conference addressed the urgent need for churches to confront imperial narratives, and the ‘Russian World’ ideology, through honest historical analysis, with theological clarity and moral courage. Fuelled by the ‘Russian World’ ideology, Russia’s war against Ukraine is both a military, political and humanitarian assault that has caused the suffering of millions and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of lives. At stake is both the life and death of those directly affected, and the shared future of Europe, as the war strikes at the democratic foundations on which our societies are built.

What is the ‘Russian World’ ideology?

Since post-Soviet times, Russian intellectual elites and the Russian Orthodox Church have articulated a range of ideas about social identity and political expansionism under the ideological umbrella of the ‘Russian World’ (*Russkii mir*). The ‘Russian World’ has been propagated as a cultural, spiritual, and geopolitical space, as well as a sphere of influence and distinct civilisation. These ideas have often lacked internal coherence and have blurred the boundary between political ideology and theology, in ways that distort Christian faith. By the 2020s they had coalesced into an imperial ideology, serving to justify Russia’s unprovoked attack against Ukraine as a ‘holy war’, even pre-emptively promising the remission of sins to soldiers guilty of war crimes.

This ideology is a successor to earlier Russian theo-political doctrines—such as ‘Moscow, the Third Rome’ and ‘Holy Rus’—and Soviet expansionism. The ‘Russian World’ ideology denies the national identity of Ukrainians and neighbouring nations, as well as their right to self-determination. Drawing on a dualistic worldview, it portrays the West—with its emphasis on human rights, democracy, liberalism, gender equality and individual autonomy—as an evil to be resisted by Russia in the so-called ‘metaphysical battle’, for the ‘traditional values’, which Russia is allegedly defending. The Russian Orthodox Church continues to provide quasi-

theological and institutional support for the invasion, thereby silencing dissent within its own clergy and other members. At the same time, they keep using ecumenical relations to promote 'traditional values', to misrepresent Russia's war of invasion as an act of self-defence, and to oppose the international condemnation of Russia's aggressive actions.

Why the 'Russian World' ideology is theologically problematic

Let us be clear: The claim that a soldier's death in the line of duty automatically cleanses sins, framing it as a sacrificial act, is heretical, just as describing Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a 'holy war' and portraying Russia as a *'katechon state'* — a force restraining global evil — are heretical.¹

The 'Russian World' ideology constitutes a distortion of the Gospel at its very foundation. Every human being bears the image of God—an imprint that cannot be erased, absorbed, or redefined by another. This is the bedrock of the Christian understanding of the human person: the person stands before God in irreducible dignity, before nation, culture, or civilisation. No ideology may subordinate this reality to its own ends. Yet the 'Russian World' ideology preaches hatred and war, instead of the love of Christ and peace. For Christians, there can never be a 'holy war'. War is incompatible with the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The responsibility of the churches is to put Christ into the centre. The traditional concept of the threefold ministry of Christ can give us clear orientation, not least because it is accepted across ecumenical borders. First, Christ encounters us as king. But Christ is not a king who oppresses and rules with violence. From Christ we learn that to rule means to serve and to help the poor and marginalised. Second, Christ encounters us as prophet. As such, Christ stands in the tradition of the prophets of the Old Testament. The prophets cry out against injustice. From Christ we learn that to be a prophet means to speak truth to power. Third, Christ encounters us as priest. His priesthood points to the community of the churches and the power of prayer, counselling and healing. From Christ we learn that we unite in prayer and lament before God. In this way, the threefold ministry of Christ can give clear contour to what it means as churches to resist empire and promote peace: serve passionately, speak boldly and pray faithfully.

How European churches must respond

In light of our Christian responsibility, we commit to take up Christ's royal, prophetic, and priestly ministry. As part of our shared witness within the Pathways to Peace Initiative, we affirm the following actions—framed within the two intertwined paths of 'Resisting Empire' and 'Promoting Peace'—and call on our churches and organisations to do the same:

Resisting Empire

Confronting ideology, misuse of faith, and propaganda

- Strengthen Ukrainian resistance to the 'Russian World' ideology and its devastating consequences.
- Challenge the misuse of faith by the Orthodox and other Churches in Russia, for example, when they declare a 'holy war.'

¹ Sermon of Patriarch Kirill, 25 September 2022 and XXV World Russian People's Council, 27–28 March 2024.

- Offer clear and responsible theological reflection on the 'Russian World', for example, by demasking the sacralisation of political power.
- Cultivate theological literacy that can recognise and challenge the misuse of religious language, for example, by resisting the temptation to confuse the Reign of God with any given political entity or form of rule.
- Prioritise democratic education and broad community engagement so that people are equipped to resist manipulation such as propaganda and misinformation.
- Name sin as sin, for example, when war crimes are being committed in the Russian war against Ukraine.

Addressing internal church responsibilities

- Reflect critically on one's own imperial heritage, for example, by addressing distorted readings of the Bible and tradition.
- Strengthen dissident Russian voices, including those resisting religious nationalism and exceptionalism.

Practicing moral accountability and public witness

- Encourage the collection and preservation of testimonies of survivors and of the fallen. The Church has always been a keeper of memory.
- Labour under the constant demands of love in our response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for example, by avoiding dehumanising language.

Promoting Peace

Offering direct support for victims and those affected by war

- Offer hospitality to refugees and support to those displaced by the war in Ukraine.
- Encourage our churches to intercede for the victims of crimes against humanity, for example, for Ukrainian children illegally deported to Russia.

Building spiritual practices oriented toward peace

- Include regular prayers for our brothers and sisters in Ukraine and all places suffering because of war, in our personal lives and in the worship services of churches.
- Pray for those complicit in Russia's aggression against Ukraine, that God's grace may lead them to the ways of the Gospel, inspire repentance, and open the path to just peace and reconciliation.

Building a just and reconciled future

- Build up truth-and-reconciliation dialogue between local churches in Eastern and Western Europe and churches in Russia resisting all forms of religious nationalism, exceptionalism and imperialist concepts.
- Encourage, promote and support non-violent conflict prevention, conflict-transformation and the patient work of reconciliation, for example working on trauma healing.
- Safeguard democracy, for example, by affirming human dignity and human rights.
- Uphold international law, for example, by advocating for the inviolability of international borders.