



Dear Praying Friends in Europe,

'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'. Matthew 5:43-44

For almost 70 years Western Europe has lived in relative peace even through the cold war years. It was different for those countries that were occupied by the Soviet Union. The question today is how do these verses affect the way we think and pray for our continent? How also do we live out Jesus' command?

Living next door to Putin

For several months, the Canopy team has tried to have an article written from the perspective of a country neighbouring Russia but it has proved difficult to find an author. So what you will read are my thoughts, as someone who has never faced the reality of war in my neighbourhood. I was grateful for a documentary from the BBC, from which I have drawn some material. I am also grateful for those I have known in the European institutions from nations that lived under the occupation of the former Soviet Union.

Almost 10 years ago, Russia annexed Crimea. Yet even before that, those countries who had only recently gained their independence were warning the west not to trust Russia. Yet the west did almost nothing and this, along with other indications that the nations of western Europe had become more disunited, emboldened Putin to make his move.

This perhaps was Putin's mistake as this time, as the rest of Europe and the USA have reacted, realising that they cannot just sit back. We have seen the greatest mobilisation of our armed forces since World War II. Exercises between nations including the USA are now happening across the continent just in case Putin's ambitions should grow.

The invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent war have affected Russia's neighbours differently:-

Poland borders both Ukraine and Belarus. Rzeszów Airport is the closest airport to Ukraine, and because of the no-fly zone, it has become the most protected airport in Europe used by the international community for aid supplies and diplomatic access to Ukraine. Poland has welcomed 1.5 million refugees; they offer help as they know they could be next. But migrants from other parts of the world are less welcome and Putin knows this. Even before the invasion Putin encouraged Belarus to funnel refugees from other parts of the world through the Białowieża Forest, knowing it would cause huge political issues, in an aim to divide Europe.

Lithuania's border with Kaliningrad makes it 'NATO's weakest link' or 'most dangerous place'. Trains travel through Lithuania between Russia and Kaliningrad without stopping and are tracked; no one is allowed to leave the train. Memories of years under occupation have left scars of exile, killings and potential loss of language and culture, and have driven solidarity with Ukraine. The feeling "we need to stop Russia or they'll rule over half the world" has driven many to volunteer and fight in Ukraine.

Latvia's dilemma is that during the Soviet era, many Russians were sent there to dilute national identity; a quarter of the population are ethnically Russian. This causes a problem for the government; a lack of support for Ukraine raises the possibility of Putin invading Latvia to 'liberate ethnic Russians', although this would be suicide, as Latvia is a NATO country. Latvia has frozen Russian assets but that has had a detrimental effect on the economy.

Estonia has been at the forefront of warning about Russian ambitions and has embraced its NATO membership with many NATO troops regularly doing military exercises, but has paid the price of cyber attacks such as in 2007, which led to the European defence centre being set up in Tallinn. Their work is to plan for possible attacks on infrastructure and the spreading of disinformation.

Finland knew the pain of invasion by Russia but has been able to co-exist through neutrality for much of the last 70 years but this year that changed when they joined NATO. However during those years of neutrality they were not idle; 50,000 bomb shelters have been built from the Cold War era, and currently used as sports halls, car parks etc. Survival techniques training is given as it's "wise to be prepared". There is military service and 1 million reservists are given regular training. They have been touched deeply by the situation in Ukraine and say "If Russia wins, it will not stop in Ukraine."

Norway with a 190 kilometre border, has never experienced occupation by Russia so has had a softer approach to its neighbour and being an early member of NATO recognised its need of security. In fact the war in Ukraine has made life a little easier, as many of the Russian troops from the border have been sent to the front line. That does not mean that life in Norway has not been affected; some Russians who settled in the country since the fall of the USSR now find it difficult to talk to or visit family back home due to the propaganda they are being fed. Norway is monitoring spy activity, potentially for attacks on gas and oil lines.

So what should we pray?

1. First let us remember our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Eph 6:12
2. Pray for those who report the situation on all sides, that they declare the truth and not propaganda.
3. Pray for an end to the conflict and unity amongst those involved, but also for unity in the family of nations we call Europe.

Update:-

The Slovakian president has today halted a shipment of weapons to Ukraine while negotiations are taking place to form a government under Robert Fico, who came top in the recent poll and who promised not to send "one more bullet" to Ukraine. There is a wider "solidarity fatigue" in Slovakia, which is also evident in some other countries too. Meanwhile, European leaders have pledged steadfast support for Ukraine while trying to maintain unity over other crises.

Additional Prayer Points:-

1. Let us pray for the region around the Campi Flegrei super volcano near Naples and for the Italian government as they make plans for a possible mass evacuation of the region.
2. Let us pray for the village of Hroza, Ukraine, that yesterday suffered the loss of a 6th of its population (52 people), killed by a ballistic missile believed to be from Russia. Every family in that village has been affected.

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