

# Unpacking the Vatican's Diplomatic Failure in Reaching a Ceasefire in the Russia-Ukraine War

by Nona Mikhelidze

The Vatican's diplomatic attempts at achieving an immediate ceasefire in the Russian war against Ukraine have failed from the very outset. Ever since the start of the Russian invasion, Pope Francis has ardently sought to mediate between the two states, directing his attention primarily towards pressing humanitarian issues, including the facilitation of prisoner exchanges. More recently, the Pope has voiced his readiness to lend support to Ukrainian authorities in their endeavours to repatriate thousands of children deported by the Russians from Ukraine – a crime that led the International Criminal Court to issue an arrest warrant against Russian President Vladimir Putin.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of April, upon returning from Hungary, the Pope revealed that secret diplomacy was underway to mediate between the conflicting

parties. However, the reactions from both Moscow and Kyiv have been denial and irritation.<sup>2</sup> A close advisor of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, explicitly stated, "President Zelensky has not consented to any such discussions on Ukraine's behalf. [...] If talks are happening, they are happening without our knowledge or our blessing."<sup>3</sup>

Less than two weeks later, President Zelensky arrived in Italy as part of his European tour, with three well-defined objectives in mind: to strengthen the military alliance with Western partners, asking for the provision of new weapons; to secure their support

<sup>1</sup> International Criminal Court, *Situation in Ukraine: ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrants against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova*, 17 March 2023, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/node/207107>.

<sup>2</sup> "Moscow, Kyiv Deny Knowledge of Vatican Peace Mission", in *Ansa*, 2 May 2023, [https://www.ansa.it/english/news/general\\_news/2023/05/02/moscow-kyiv-deny-knowledge-of-vatican-peace-mission\\_0b6a58e2-d6ec-4e21-8e22-ae29b4d09ec1.html](https://www.ansa.it/english/news/general_news/2023/05/02/moscow-kyiv-deny-knowledge-of-vatican-peace-mission_0b6a58e2-d6ec-4e21-8e22-ae29b4d09ec1.html).

<sup>3</sup> Katharina Krebs and Matthew Chance, "Kremlin Says It Is Unaware of Any Vatican Peace Plan Mission for Ukraine", in *CNN*, 2 May 2023, [https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-05-02-23/h\\_6d0bcc611c57195e8c58f2043d833606](https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-05-02-23/h_6d0bcc611c57195e8c58f2043d833606).

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in initiating negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the European Union; and to obtain their backing for the NATO summit in Vilnius, where Kyiv awaits concrete steps to bring Ukraine closer to the transatlantic alliance. It is within this context that the meeting with Pope Francis took place, serving as a purely symbolic event. It provided an opportunity to address all lingering doubts and to conclusively put an end to any insinuations or speculations surrounding the alleged Vatican diplomacy aimed at achieving an immediate ceasefire in the war.

The official visit began on the morning of 13 May, with Italian media providing live coverage of the official meetings. Their narrative accompanied the events, suggesting that Zelensky's primary motivation for the trip was to engage with the Vatican's diplomacy and its peace plan. After the meeting with the Pope, the Ukrainian President took to Twitter, stating, "I asked [the Pope] to condemn [Russia's] crimes in Ukraine. Because there can be no equality between the victim and the aggressor. I also talked about our Peace Formula as the only effective algorithm for achieving a just peace. I proposed joining its implementation."<sup>4</sup> Later, during the press conference with Italian journalists, Zelensky was even more explicit: "The war is on Ukrainian soil, it is Ukrainian soldiers and civilians who are dying, so any peace proposal must originate from Kyiv, not from the Vatican, China, or elsewhere."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Volodymyr Zelensky, @ZelenskyyUa: "I Met with Pope Francis", *Twitter post*, 13 May 2023, <https://twitter.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1657415728427941893>.

<sup>5</sup> Rai Uno, *Speciale Porta a Porta: Zelensky*

The following day, Zelensky's advisor Mykhailo Podolyak vented all the frustration accumulated by Ukraine over the past 15 months of war towards the Vatican and its narrative about the war. He tweeted directly in Italian, writing, "The Vatican is primarily about morality. When you call an aggressor by their name. When you harshly and directly condemn mass crimes. When you openly side with a country that is being killed and destroyed without provocation. When you personally defend those who are unconditional victims of Russian aggression. When you call evil, which is Russia, by its name. Only then does Holy Justice emerge. Because it's not about some kind of 'mediation in favour of the aggressor,' but about true peace and true punishment of evil."<sup>6</sup> Thus, with this accusation of "mediating in favour of the aggressor", Kyiv has definitively closed the door to the Vatican, preventing it from acting as a mediator on matters related to the belligerent aspect of the war.

The reasons for the failure of the Vatican's diplomacy even before it began are manifold. Starting with Podolyak's statements, one could argue that it is absurd to ask the Pope, as a mediator, to take a position between Russia and Ukraine. After all, a mediator should be impartial. The point, however, is that for Kyiv, the Pope is not impartial, he is rather mediating "in

a *Porta a Porta*, 13 May 2023, <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2023/05/Speciale-Porta-a-Porta-Zelenskyy-a-Porta-a-porta-13052023-cd7c6064-688e-4906-a3c3-cc6cfe9afcf7.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Mykhailo Podolyak, @Podolyak\_M: "Il Vaticano riguarda principalmente la moralità", *Twitter post*, 14 May 2023, [https://twitter.com/Podolyak\\_M/status/1657627663886958599](https://twitter.com/Podolyak_M/status/1657627663886958599).

favour of the aggressor". Furthermore, Ukraine does not see the Vatican as a political actor or institution, unlike other potential mediators such as Turkey, China or the United Nations. For them, "the Vatican is primarily about morality". This perspective explains why Kyiv does not criticise Turkey and China for their neutral stance in the war, as these countries prioritise their national interests and avoid direct confrontation with the Kremlin. In contrast, the Vatican is seen by Kyiv as a religious institution with limited influence in Ukraine. It is worth noting that the majority (74 per cent) of Ukrainians identify themselves as Eastern Orthodox, with only 8 per cent being Greek Catholic.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the anti-Catholic propaganda spread for years by Orthodox institutions (either Russian or under Russian influence) has contributed to the Vatican's unpopularity not only in Ukraine, but in most parts of the post-Soviet space.

The aversion to the Pope's mediation is also influenced by his interpretation of the war, particularly his famous remark about "NATO barking at Russia's gate"<sup>8</sup> that suggests that the conflict is a proxy war orchestrated by the United States and provoked by the West. This narrative raises two concerns for the Ukrainians. Firstly, it portrays the Pope as being anti-Western, opposing NATO

<sup>7</sup> Rating Group, *Religious Preferences of the Population of Ukraine*, 10 April 2015, [https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/religioznye\\_predpochteniya\\_naseleniya\\_ukrainy.html](https://ratinggroup.ua/en/research/ukraine/religioznye_predpochteniya_naseleniya_ukrainy.html).

<sup>8</sup> Luciano Fontana, "Pope Francis: «I Am Ready to Meet Putin in Moscow»", in *Corriere della Sera*, 3 May 2022, [https://www.corriere.it/cronache/22\\_maggio\\_03/pope-francis-putin-e713a1de-cad0-11ec-84d1-341c28840c78.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/cronache/22_maggio_03/pope-francis-putin-e713a1de-cad0-11ec-84d1-341c28840c78.shtml).

and the United States for ideological reasons, thereby aligning him with the Kremlin. In contrast, for Kyiv, NATO, the US and the entire Western alliance are strategic partners crucial for their security and survival as nation state. Second, the narrative of a "proxy war" is seen as inherently colonialist, as it denies agency to the Ukrainian people, undermining their ability to be active participants in the conflict and possible negotiations. Instead, it presents Ukraine, and its population of over 40 million, as a mere pawn in the hands of the so-called "great powers".

Another reason for the lack of success of Vatican diplomacy is related to its request for an immediate ceasefire. The Vatican overlooks that President Zelensky, at this time, understandably lacks both the willingness and the authority to make such a decision, simply because, unlike Putin, he is accountable to his country's public opinion. A recent survey conducted across Ukraine, including the eastern and southeastern regions (excluding the Russian-occupied territories) and published in March 2023, reveals that 97 per cent of Ukrainians believe they will win the war against Russia, with 74 per cent confident that Ukraine will retain all territories within its internationally recognised borders established in 1991.<sup>9</sup> If Zelensky were to negotiate under these circumstances, especially while Ukraine is in a counteroffensive phase and having already achieved success in Bakhmut, which was deemed a lost battle, he would risk inciting another

<sup>9</sup> Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR), *National Survey of Ukraine, February 2023*, 22 March 2023, [https://www.iri.org/?post\\_type=resource&p=24127](https://www.iri.org/?post_type=resource&p=24127).

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"Maidan" uprising. One should not forget that Ukraine has a vibrant civil society (not only the "third sector" but all politically active citizens) that has traditionally held its government accountable for its choices and actions. That is why, since 1991, no Ukrainian president, except for Leonid Kuchma, has been re-elected for a second term. Furthermore, Ukraine has witnessed two revolutions, in 2004 and 2014, organised from the grassroots by Ukrainians who felt betrayed in their aspirations for a European future.

In Ukraine, today's war is perceived as an anti-colonial struggle for physical survival against the Russian invader, for freedom and for Europe. It is precisely due to this military, political and social context that the Vatican's diplomacy has failed and is unlikely to succeed in the future, except in matters pertaining to humanitarian issues related to the war.

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