

Kyiv Antagonizing Catholic Church After Pope's Calls for Peace Negotiations

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Pope Francis has once again [called on Ukraine to begin negotiations with Moscow towards a peace deal](#):

"Let us never forget war is always a defeat. One cannot go on in war. We must make every effort to negotiate to end the war."

This has sparked a wave of fury and anti-Catholic speech in Ukraine. Earlier this month, the Pope had stated Kyiv should "have the courage to raise the white flag and to negotiate". In an interview last month, he said

"When you see that you are defeated, that things are not going well, you have to have the courage to negotiate."

The Pope's call is far from absurd. Even NATO's former Supreme Commander, James Stavridis, has called for [a land-for-peace deal](#) for Ukraine.

Regardless of one's stance on the ongoing conflict (for which [the West has a lot of blame to carry](#)), when military victory is not attainable, nations have historically sought peace by means of diplomacy.

As Connor Echols writes, in his piece for [Responsible Statecraft](#), the US Congress is not likely to pass any further aid for Ukraine in the near future and the Pope's comments in fact "sound closer to reality than a lot of the pontification coming from European capitals."

Ukrainian officials, in any case, have responded by attacking the Catholic Church and comparing the Pope's statement to Catholic clergy collaboration with the Nazis in World War

II. Ukraine's ambassador to the Vatican, Andrii Yurash, went as far as to compare the suggestion to talking to Adolf Hitler.

Those are peculiar choices of words, considering that [Ukraine has its own Nazi problem](#). Ukrainian nationalist and far-right outlets have published obscene cartoons ridiculing the Pope and this did not reflect well on Ukraine's catholic partners and neighbors.

Spirituality is a key aspect of human cultures and relations with churches and religious organizations play an important role even in terms of soft power and diplomacy for any country (even the Soviet Union was no exception). This is not an area in which Kyiv has played very well.

For one thing, in the realm of relations with the Christian churches, Ukraine already has its own Christian Orthodox problem since at least December 2022.

Jonathan Tobin, Newsweek editor in chief, for instance, has [compared](#) President Zelensky to a dictator who is only ready to allow religious organizations that fully support his regime. Zelensky has in fact been advancing moves to [outlaw \(Russian\) Orthodox communities](#), something which even Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych, head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, denounced. Already in 2022, the issue was said to threaten any future Ukrainian membership, the Telegraph [reported](#). The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is also on the record as having voiced their concerns regarding the matter of [freedom of religion in Ukraine](#).

The matter is no joke. Monasteries and cathedrals have been seized by the Ukrainian SBU (Security Service). According to a Modern Diplomacy [news report](#): "these findings were often ridiculous. Security officials exhibited photos of children's bibles, prayer books, old liturgical books, archival collections of newspapers and magazines featuring the words 'Russian,' and Christmas or Easter sermons of the Russian Church patriarch. In cases where there was nothing to find, the special services planted compromising evidence themselves." Bear in mind that at least 34% of the Ukrainian population speak Russian in their personal lives.

Such a campaign is part of the larger [civil rights](#) issue in Ukraine, involving the [Russian minority](#), a problem that [even the Venice Commission](#) acknowledges in its recommendations to Kyiv. Nicolai N. Petro, a professor of political science at the University of Rhode Island, [writing for Foreign Policy](#), has described the country as having "wartime policies" that "effectively relegate Russian speakers to permanent second-class status", in such a way that many Ukrainians "across the political spectrum", including "former officials" and "intellectuals" worry that such policies, even after peace is achieved, will "alienate, criminalize, or deport a significant portion of the country's population."

It is indeed hard to describe Kyiv's campaign against Orthodox communities as anything but Russophobia.

About four months ago, the Ukrainian parliament gave its initial approval for a law that would [ban](#) the [Ukrainian Orthodox Church \(UOC\)](#), which has over 2 million members and thousands of parishes, even though this Church does not have very good relations with the Patriarchate of Moscow, to put it mildly: in a January 2023 [announcement](#) on Telegram, Archpriest Nikolai Danilevich, the head of the UOC Department of External Church Relations, stated that the Church "disassociated itself from the Moscow Patriarchate and confirmed its

independent status, and made appropriate changes to its statutes". Autonomy has in fact been a topic of discussion since 2017, and as of now all references to a connection with the Russian Orthodox Church have been [removed](#) from the UOC statutes, and, during liturgical services, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow is not mentioned, although other heads of churches are commemorated.

Bear in mind that, on May 2022, the UOC issued a statement [supporting Ukraine armed forces](#) and condemning what it described as the "Russian invasion", even though it [criticizes](#) the actions of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), which is a different Church, and the actions of the previous Petro Poroshenko presidency as having "provoked" Russia into military action. Apparently, this is enough for Kyiv to describe this Church as a nest of "Moscow agents".

The Ukrainian church issue (which goes beyond the UOC) has repercussions on the larger Orthodox world and the larger Christian world, even. It is no wonder Zelensky has been the target of criticism in the [Christian media](#) worldwide. Now, Kyiv is seeking to antagonize the Vatican with the most aggressive rhetoric. This will only make matters worse, from an Ukrainian perspective.

Ukraine's diplomacy, since 2022 at least, has largely consisted in alienating its own Catholic allies and patrons, such as Poland, and basically attacking all of its supporters with accusations of betrayal and aggressive criticism. The Ukrainian leadership apparently is not ready to acknowledge the fact that attitudes towards the conflict are changing globally, and that includes countries of the Catholic world. Its own divisive Orthodox problem, with domestic and international repercussions, could very well be joined by a Catholic and overall Christian problem with equally important implications. The matter of civil rights and minorities in Ukraine (be they ethnic or religious), as I've [written](#) before, remains a potential source for conflicts even after peace is reached.

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Featured image: President Zelenskyy meets Pope Francis at the Vatican on May 13, 2023. Photo credit: EFE

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