The Holy See's Policy on the War in Ukraine (2022-23)

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Abstract.

The article examines the Holy See's policy towards the war in Ukraine from 24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023. The Vatican's policy of neutrality is presented, along with several examples of how this strategy was implemented by popes throughout historical periods. It focuses mainly on the public position of Pope Francis in terms of his attitude towards the West and Russia, seeking to explain the pope's decision to adopt a new policy. By analysing various speeches, sermons and interviews given by the pontiff, the article presents Francis' neutral position in the war, both by hesitating to clearly acknowledge Russia's role as an aggressor and by recognising Ukraine as a victim in the conflict. This position, driven by Francis' desire to serve as a mediator in the conflict, has led him to pursue various tactics to establish communication with Russia, primarily through efforts to maintain contact with Patriarch Kirill. However, the policies adopted by the pope do not appear to have yielded tangible results.

The Vatican holds a unique position of political influence on Earth, wielding unprecedented political power disproportionate to its size. This article uses terms of 'Vatican', 'Papal State' and 'Holy See' interchangeably, although there is a distinction between these concepts. Unlike any other religion, Catholicism operates with its own official state, centralised government and bureaucratic apparatus.

Although the era has passed when the pope could rally Europe to military campaigns with a single sermon, his moral authority, though transformed, remains esteemed. The dogmas of the faith, created and adjusted by the Church under his leadership, serve as a moral compass for a large part of the world's population. As war began in Europe on 24 February 2022 with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, various nations became involved in the conflict to some extent, either supporting a side or maintaining neutrality. The Vatican, adhering to its stance of neutrality, has also attempted to mediate a peace agreement between Ukraine and Russia. Given the Vatican's historical continuity in assuming the position of mediator, albeit the exact results have depended on the incumbent pope, such a policy fits with its soft power capabilities (Randriamanantena 2020). This article examines Francis' position and policy on the war in Ukraine through an analysis of his speeches, interviews and encyclicals sourced primarily from *Vatican News* and *L'Osservatore Romano*, supplemented by other sources and various academic literature. The first section presents the historical policy of neutrality that underpins the current pope's position on the war in Ukraine. In addition to approaching the conflict from a neutral position, Pope Francis' stance is shaped by his pre-war relations with Western powers and Russia. The pontiff's cultural background and the parallels in his cultural views and their alignment to non-Western states like Russia explain the contrast between Francis and previous popes; these subjects will be examined in the second section. The third section analyses the pope's position on the war in Ukraine and how it appeals to both sides; acknowledging Ukraine as a victim of the war without openly branding Russia as the aggressor. Such an approach aims to avoid alienating the Holy See from either side of the conflict and to maintain the role of the pope as an acceptable mediator. Moreover, Francis' reluctance to recognise the aggressor in the war also reflects a lack of understanding of Eastern European affairs, which is evident in his perception of the motives for the war. Nevertheless, signs of the pope's

evolving perspective are discernible, as evidenced by his shifting stance on the supply of arms to Ukraine. The final section is devoted to an analysis of Francis' efforts to maintain contacts with Russia and to influence the search for peace in practical terms. The article concludes that Francis' policy, despite adhering to historic neutrality and mediation attempts, is unsuccessful, as no tangible effects of the papal efforts have come to fruition in the first year of the war.

The Holy See in geopolitics: between neutrality and mediation.

The Holy See has consistently held a significant role in international affairs. Even in the 20th century, when the territory of the Apostolic See had already definitively settled within the boundaries of the Vatican state, papal legates traversed Europe, liaising with local churches, influencing local politics by representing the central Roman Curia and resolving regional conflicts. When John Paul II assumed the papacy, the cleric from then-Communist Poland demonstrated the great moral authority of the Bishop of Rome, who at the end of the century was considered partly responsible for the Soviet Union's loss of the Cold War (Edwards 2005). Although Benedict XVI may not have possessed his predecessor's charisma, the authority of the Holy See remained, eventually yielding a substantial change in papal office with the accession of Francis I of Argentina to the papal throne. Under Pope Francis, the West and the world faced new global challenges: the war in Syria, the occupation of Crimea and, recently, the full-scale war in Ukraine. This latest conflict offers a prime opportunity to observe and analyse the pope's involvement in mediation and the Holy See's impact on international geopolitics.

In theory, Catholic theology holds that all human beings are inherently sinful, seemingly suggesting that any practical engagement by the Holy See with states in geopolitical matters would contradict fundamental Church teachings (Cahill 2017). On this view, the Apostolic See should in principle have no foreign policy at all and not interfere in the inter-state

affairs of the world. However, this idealistic position does not correspond to the realities of global conflict and even its theological basis is questionable. The Church's doctrine is more in line with the 'hate the sin but love the sinner' approach (Volder 2023, 37). This policy allows the Holy See both to rely on its moral code by applying the virtue of compassion, one of the most important virtues in Catholic teaching, and to play a role in international politics, especially in wars, where the issues and the degree of guilt of the parties can be complicated. Moreover, as Cahill has noted, the Holy See often adopts a neutral *realpolitik* approach because it is the only way the Roman Curia can achieve and implement tangible outcomes in the world (Cahill 2017).

Consequently, in the 21st century, when the influence of the Papal State is based primarily on moral authority rather than conventional power, the Vatican prioritises the use of diplomatic capabilities. This approach formalises a policy of 'neutrality towards all', aiming to mediate conflicts without taking sides in political disputes (Axworthy 2016). However, the political position of the Holy See has always been heavily influenced by the incumbent pope, with this policy of neutrality not consistently applied throughout history. There have been historical examples where the neutrality advocated for has translated into equal justice for all and a strong moral stance, such as Pope Pius XI's harsh criticism of totalitarianism before the Second World War. His strong condemnation of the 'barbarism' of communism in the long papal encyclical 'Divini Redemptoris' (Pius XI 1937a) and his encyclical against the Nazi regime 'With Fiery Concern' (Pius XI 1937b) were published in the same year. However, the so-called 'silent neutrality' of Pius XI's successor, Pius XII, is still subject to ongoing debate. At the outbreak of World War II, Pius XII's diplomacy in the face of the Holocaust was known as the 'papal silence', when the Apostolic See did not react to the genocide of the Jews and other peoples (Volder 2023). These actions of Pius XII are now interpreted differently, as arguments have been put forward to explain the different aims the pope may

have been trying to achieve with his implementation of neutrality (Kurth 1993). Such examples show that, whilst the policy of neutrality has historical precedents, its perception and implementation depend heavily on the pontiff in power.

Accordingly, the Holy See's pursuit of neutrality has often been successful. As a mediator, Pope Leo XIII successfully settled the dispute between Spain and Germany over the Caroline Islands in 1885 (Araujo 2004). A more recent example of the Vatican's neutral diplomacy as a mediator is the Chilean dispute with Argentina over the Beagle Channel (Negroponte and Rooney 2013). At the end of the 1970s, Chile was ruled by the dictator Augusto Pinochet, while a military junta had recently seized power in Argentina. Both countries carried out repressive crackdowns within their borders and sought to ensure the survival of the regime. However, from a realistic and neutral position, the Vatican sought to reconcile the two states in the context of a territorial dispute to prevent escalation into open military conflict. Idealistically, the Holy See could be reproached for cooperating with the two repressive regimes, but such actions reveal the role and objectives of the Holy See's policy of neutrality, which aims to seek the most peaceful and workable solution in present circumstances. In the Chile-Argentina dispute, Pope John Paul II's mediation was successful, with both sides agreeing in 1979 to reduce the military contingent on the border and to seek a peaceful solution. Thanks to further mediation by the Holy See, an agreement between the parties was reached and signed in Rome in 1985 (Negroponte and Rooney 2013). This further supports the argument that the role of mediator assumed by the papacy can help facilitate peace processes between adversaries. These examples from the history of the Holy See are, of course, well known to Francis as precedents for his efforts to continuously apply the strategy of the conciliator.

Pope Francis' policy towards Russia during his pontificate.

Traditionally, the Holy See has been regarded as one of the West's closest allies, particularly during the Cold War, when Polish Pope John Paul II took a clear stance and enacted political measures to support the West in its struggle against the Soviet Union (Flamini 2014). Francis, on the other hand, comes from a different cultural background to his predecessors. In the 21st century, the Cold War is no longer a salient issue and many of the world's contemporary issues are partly attributable to former Western allies. Today, the West, and particularly US culture, embodies several values antithetical to Francis' beliefs about a just world. As *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. writes:

'Francis is anti-consumerist and anti-materialist. That is quite at odds with an American ethos that turns the mall into a religious shrine and shopping into a sacrament. The pope […] extols the simple life, a value popular in sections of the environmental movement, but not a big seller in a country obsessed with stuff and gadgets' (Dionne 2014).

Growing up in Argentina, Francis is more acquainted with American than Russian imperialism; American policies and involvement in Argentina's Dirty Wars (Zaretsky 2018) likely influenced Jorge Bergoglio, the future Pope Francis. As Gerald Beyer notes, although the Holy See always maintained a policy of neutrality, it was generally supportive of NATO. Since the onset of the Cold War, all popes believed that NATO contributed to the pursuit of world peace. However, Francis' assertion that NATO was 'barking at Russia's door' came as a shock to the Alliance (Beyer 2024, 167). Pope Francis no longer embodies the Western pope archetype as his predecessors did. The pontiff's first official statement on international politics was an address to Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2013, ahead of the planned G20 meeting in St Petersburg, during which he asked Putin to join world leaders in helping to 'find ways to overcome the conflicting positions and

to lay aside the futile pursuit of a military solution' (Francis 2013). Shortly after the G20 meeting, Putin himself visited the Vatican, sparking discussions of increasingly warm relations between the two countries, as Russia has recognised and capitalised on the shifting dynamics with the Apostolic See. As Italian journalist Massimo Franco put it, Russia no longer viewed the Vatican as the 'religious corollary of the North Atlantic Alliance' and Francis, in turn, saw Putin as 'a sort of Christian Czar, defender of Christian minorities in the Middle East' (Franco 2014). Such personal attitudes of the states lead to a natural rapprochement: both states propagate conservative social policies, the promotion of traditional family values and opposition to the rights of sexual minorities. The geopolitical worldview also linked Putin's Russia with the new political direction of the Holy See: political concern for the Christian minority in the Middle East and contempt for the interventionist US policy in Iraq, the American actions in Syria and the Arab Spring (Flamini 2014). Thus, Russia began to enjoy warm relations with the Vatican at the expense of the pope's diminished sympathies towards the West or those affiliated with it, such as Ukraine.

The growing inter-state relations between Russia and the Holy See has begun to influence the Vatican's relations with Ukraine and the importance of Russia has become evident in Francis' policies. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Vatican refrained from issuing an official condemnation of Russia's aggressive actions in violation of international law (Reese 2017). Even though there were occasional calls for 'move forward […] on the path toward peace' (Pope Francis 2014), there was no clear identification of the perpetrator behind the problem. It seems that Francis did not perceive the conflict to be of great importance, at least not as an intervention of one country in another to promote its own political goals. In one of his interviews in 2022, Francis, while not directly blaming the Ukrainians for the full-scale war, stated that 'the only thing that is blamed on the Ukrainians is that they reacted in the Donbas, but we are talking about 10 years ago' (Pope

Francis 2022a). Moreover, before the full-scale war of 2022, the demand for increased attention to Red Cross activities in Donbass from 2014 was a surprise for the Church and its institution, as the Red Cross itself testifies (Vatican News 2020). This also relates to the broader picture, where the importance of the Donbass conflict and Russia's influence on events were not considered important by the Holy See elite from the beginning of the conflict in 2014. The Donbass war, which began in 2014 following the Maidan revolution in Ukraine, a change of leadership that lead to the election of a pro-European and anti-Russian government and the start of armed conflict in regions bordering Russia, was a key moment, which lead for the development of the conflict in scale in 2022 (Demir 2022). While we now know that hostilities in Eastern Ukraine were staged and organised by the Russian government from the very beginning (Mitrokhin 2014). These perceptions suggest that the pope viewed the Donbas war as a local Ukrainian problem with little prospect of spreading beyond the region. While there are explanations for Russia's consistent actions in trying to keep Ukraine within its political sphere (Demir 2022), Francis does not seem to have recognised this tendency. His perception of blaming Ukraine for the Donbass war, his failure to recognise Russia as a major actor in the conflict, his apparent failure to see the link between this increase in tensions and the political events of the Maidan revolution (as evidenced by the Church's surprise at the increased involvement of the Red Cross in Donbass, as well as the pope's failure to understand the importance of Russian interests in the events), indicate his lack of understanding of the Eastern European geopolitical context.

Moreover, when considering both Russia and Ukraine, Francis' geopolitical vision appears to assign greater importance to Russia. According to Roland Flamini, the Holy See's critical attitude towards Ukrainians was because the 2014 revolution did not find much sympathy in Rome at the time. The Maidan revolution outlined a clear Ukrainian aspiration to align with and eventually join the

European Union (Flamini 2014), an aspiration that did not find favour in Rome due to the EU's historic reluctance to formally acknowledge the importance of its Christian foundations (Flamini 2014). Pope Benedict XVI had previously criticised Europe for losing its values, weakening in faith and becoming increasingly secular. On the other hand, Putin's attitude towards the West was, in this sense, more in line with that of Francis. Consequently, regarding Ukraine, Russia emerged as the more significant partner in the pope's geopolitical perception (Flamini 2014). In 2016, Pope Francis and Russian Patriarch Kirill signed the 'Havana Declaration', wherein the Holy See recognised Ukraine as part of the Moscow Patriarchate, despite Ukrainians longstanding efforts to establish their own ecclesiastical province and assert independence from Moscow's political influence (Ukrainian officials were not invited to the signing of the declaration) (Pavlenko 2017). As the Donbas war was already underway at the time, both parties mentioned it in the document ('the hostility in Ukraine'), but no reference was made to Russia's involvement (Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill 2016). According to Pavlo Pavlenko, this discrepancy stemmed from Francis' prioritisation of Russia and its territorial claims over Ukraine (Pavlenko 2017). As a result, Francis' pre-war geopolitical sympathies aligned more with Russia than with Ukraine, influencing the way Francis approached the role of mediator in the 2022 Ukrainian war.

Pope Francis' rhetoric and position on the war in Ukraine.

Since the Russian invasion, Ukraine has become one of the main focal points of Pope Francis' rhetoric and diplomacy. Although the Holy See's primary portal, *L'Osservatore Romano,* did not feature any specific papal report or statement on 24 February, the Vatican's own news portal, 'Vatican News', has extensively covered the events. The aforementioned *L'Osservatore Romano* serves as the most frequent source of the pope's various statements, sermons, interviews and other positions taken by senior clerics

of the Church. In the period between 24 February 2022 and 24 February 2023, there were 221 English-language publications on the website mentioning the word 'Ukraine', compared to only 12 publications in total from the beginning of 2019 to the onset of the war in Ukraine in 2022. It is noteworthy to compare these figures with the more extensive Italian version of the website, which had a total of 2,069 publications in the first year of the war (185 publications mentioning the word 'Ukraine' in the period from 2019 to 24 February 2022). This section analyses and compares only the publications and reports in English.

The analysis of Francis' speeches during this period indicates that the pope has adopted the Vatican's historic position of neutrality. From the beginning of the war, Francis did not take a clear position on naming Russia as the war's aggressive perpetrator. However, it is worth noting that from the outset of the war, the pope was opposed to recognising the legitimacy of the terms used by Moscow. Francis has extensively addressed the spread of lies and propaganda, emphasising the dangers they pose, especially in the context of this war. He strongly condemned the use of propagandistic euphemisms such as 'military operation' (Pope Francis 2022b). Moreover, Francis does not minimise the severity of the war and often employs harsh rhetoric when referring to specific attacks on certain areas or communities in Ukraine. In his sermon on Sunday 13 March 2022 (during the siege of Mariupol), the pope referred to Mariupol as a 'martyred city', suffering from the 'barbarity of the killing of children and innocent and defenceless citizens', describing the events in Mariupol as a 'massacre' and emphasising the necessity of a 'decisive focus on negotiation' (Pope Francis 2022c). In April 2022, after the clarification of the events in Bucha, Francis again appealed for peace, denouncing the mass graves discovered in the Ukrainian town and praying for the victims, whose 'innocent blood cries to Heaven and implores: put an end to this war' (Pope Francis 2022d). Thus, Francis' public statements indicate that he does not take sides in the conflict, remaining

within his position of humanitarian neutrality.

In addition, Francis' public actions demonstrate his insistence on considering and engaging with both conflicting countries equally. This position is exemplified most significantly through religious actions. An important and illustrative example of this is the pope's Consecration of the State to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a rare event of great religious significance involving special Masses seeking the assistance of the Divine Mary in critical matters (Kelly 2022). The performance of this rite dates from Popes Pius XII and Paul IV, but perhaps the most prominent instance is the consecration of Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary by Pope John Paul II in 1984, which, although not officially stated at the time, was understood as a pro-Western political act with strong moral authority, directed against the legitimacy of Soviet policy and communism (Hnilica 2022). The consecration can, thus, also be a political statement. Pope Francis, recognising this dynamic, performed the same rite on 25 March 2022. This time, however, the pope made a different choice, consecrating Russia, along with Ukraine itself, to the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Pope Francis 2022e). Similar inclusiveness can be observed in other religious rites, such as the pope's decision in 2022, to allow both Ukrainian and Russian families to carry a cross during the celebration of Good Friday in Rome, a decision that also received criticism (Matranga 2022). Such decisions by Francis highlight his commitment to treating both countries equally, and these examples affirm the sincerity of Francis' belief in the implementation of such a policy, exercised through faith and religious rites.

Moreover, Francis avoids directly acknowledging Russia's culpability, but still attempts to refer to the effects and instances of aggression. He highlights the brutality of the conflict, attributing it to 'mercenaries', including individuals of Chechen and Syrian descent employed by Russian forces (Pope Francis 2022f). This reference to mercenaries and the involvement of diverse Russian ethnicities as actors in this war is noteworthy. Francis revisited this topic when he highlighted the suffering of the Ukrainian people:

'When you have a martyred people, you have someone who martyrs them. … I speak about the cruelty because I have much information about the cruelty of the troops that come in. Generally, the cruelest are perhaps those who are of Russia but are not of the Russian tradition, such as the Chechens, the Buryati and so on' (Pope Francis 2022g).

As Nemeth noted, by attributing all atrocities to others, 'ethnic groups are made scapegoats' (Nementh 2023). Thus, all brutality and war crimes are somehow acknowledged, but attributed to 'no one', since the true aggressor, Russia, is not named. Indeed, the pope frequently speaks about the Ukrainians and their suffering, recognising the Ukrainians as the victims, but is reluctant to name the aggressor side (Russia). Although Francis once stated, 'Certainly, the one who is invading is the Russian state. 'That is very clear' (Pope Francis 2022g), he later added, 'Sometimes I try not to specify so as not to offend and rather condemn in general, although it is well known whom I am condemning. It is not necessary that I put a name and surname' (Pope Francis 2022g). Francis's decision not to directly name and 'offend' the aggressor reflects his attempt to maintain a moral stance for the Ukrainians without alienating Russia too muchFurthermore, claims by the Russian government that Francis later apologised for insulting Russian ethnicities were made but this was not confirmed by the Vatican (Novaya Gazeta 2022). Ultimately, Francis seeks to maintain his potential appeal as a mediator in the conflict, aiming to satisfy both sides without damaging relations with either.

Despite recognising Ukraine as a victim, Francis' understanding is more complicated because it devalues the Ukrainian side by not fully considering it as an independent actor, a perception possibly influenced by his pre-war relations with Russia. In addressing this issue, Francis is not pro-Russian. He understands the danger of appearing so, which is why he once specifically referred to this issue: 'I am not [pro-Putin]. It would be simplistic and wrong to say such a thing. I am simply against reducing

complexity to the distinction between good and bad, without reasoning about roots and interests, which are very complex' (Pope Francis 2022f). In another interview, Francis again emphasised the complexity of the situation: 'there are no […] good guys and bad guys [...]. Something global is emerging, with elements that are very much intertwined' (Pope Francis 2022f). Francis further commented that 'they [NATO] are barking at the gates of Russia. They do not understand that the Russians are imperialists and will allow no foreign power to approach them' (Pope Francis 2022f), suggesting that major international conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, serve as stages for countries to launch proxy wars (Mikhelidze 2023). Francis often discusses the role of 'partisan interests' in these conflicts (23 February 2022; 27 February 2022; 4 November 2022). Such insight can be gained by looking at the language used to describe the heroism of the Ukrainian people: 'Ukraine is an expert in suffering slavery and war. It is a rich country [...] torn apart by the will of those who want to take it over and exploit it. [...] Brave people. A people not afraid to fight. [...] What is before our eyes is a situation of world war, global interests, arms sales and geopolitical appropriation, which is martyring a heroic people' (Pope Francis 2022a). On several occasions, the pope has reiterated the importance of the arms industry: 'This is why wars are waged: to test the weapons we have produced' (Pope Francis 2022a). This, along with the previous exaltation of Ukrainian heroism, gives the impression of a brave but helpless people at the centre of the interests of large states and corporations. In another instance, Francis said: 'It is unthinkable that a free state can make war against another free state [...] in Ukraine it seems that others created the conflict' (Pope Francis 2022a). The idea that an independent state could attack another independent state for irrational, nationalistic or any other political reasons does not seem to appeal to the pope. This lack of understanding of the eastern European geopolitical and historical context (Matviyishyn and Roche 2022) may contribute to Francis' perception of major partisan interests as the causes of the war in Ukraine. Additionally, the

unwillingness to explicitly acknowledge Russia's role in the roots of the conflict shows the influence of the positive pre-war relations between the Vatican and Russia, as Russia remains an important and positive actor in Francis' geopolitical perception and therefore cannot be named as the sole perpetrator. This, together with the pope's anti-globalist and anti-Western stance, leads him to look for broad causes and 'global interests' in the war in Ukraine.

However, Francis' understanding of the specifics of the war, particularly regarding the issue of supplying arms to Ukraine, appears to be evolving. Whilst the Catholic Church's stance on 'just war' is complex, with Francis being one of those who tried to reject the notion altogether (Mcelwee 2016), his position seems to be shifting. In May 2022, in an interview with the Italian daily 'Corriere della Sera', Francis said that it was not clear to him how to answer 'the question of whether it is right to supply [arms to] the Ukrainians' (Pope Francis 2022a). Yet, in September of the same year, he indicated that supplying arms 'can be moral—morally acceptable—if it is done according to the conditions of morality' (Pope Francis 2022h). The question of violence and the place of concepts of 'peace' and 'just war' are developed by Francis in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. The document shows his attempt to find a proper place for both in the modern world, or rather to promote the adoption of geopolitical solutions of peace instead of justified wars. Francis is the advocate of the former, but it is also evident that in the above-mentioned encyclical the pope does not give a clear answer on how the policy of non-violence can resolve all geopolitical problems (Smytsnyuk 2023). Although Francis advocates for peace, he still acknowledges the potential moral legitimacy of violence, as evidenced by his comments on the supply of arms to Ukraine. This shift in thinking can be attributed to the changing understanding of war and the Ukrainian context.

Pope Francis' peace efforts in the context of the war in Ukraine.

In addition to encouraging both sides to negotiate and seek peace through rhetoric, the Holy See has taken active political steps in implementing its policy of neutral mediation in an attempt to broker a peace agreement. On 25 February, the second day of the invasion, Francis visited the Russian embassy in the Vatican (Vatican News 2022). This political move is rather unusual, as the established practice is for ambassadors or representatives of foreign countries to visit the pope in the Vaticanand not the other way around. The recent meeting was therefore unconventional, demonstrating the pope's attitude to the significance of the situation (Pullella 2022). As Western leaders began to visit Kiev in a show of solidarity with the Ukrainians, journalists asked Francis if he planned to visit Kiev. The pontiff replied that he would like to visit Kiev to meet Zelensky in person, but that he sees his visit to Kiev as part of his mediation policy. Francis has repeated several times that he will only go to Kiev if he can also go to Moscow, either a trip to 'Russia and Ukraine' or 'neither' (Pope Francis 2023). As the pontiff said: 'What good would it do for the pope to go [only] to Kyiv if the war were to continue the next day?' (O'Connell 2022). Indeed, such a decision by Francis seems logical considering the Holy See's political choices, as any unilateral visit to Kiev by the Bishop of Rome would be seen by Russians as a clear siding of the Holy See with the West, undermining any possible authority as a neutral mediator (Volder 2023). Despite this choice, no visits to either country were arranged during the first year of the war, suggesting that Francis' ability to mediate in the conflict remained limited.

Even though he was unable to contact Putin directly, Pope Francis tried to communicate with his Russian counterpart, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and the Russian Orthodox Church. The patriarch, a close ally of Putin, was also a key figure in the war. He was heavily involved in justifying the conflict on the Russian side, speaking of the need for a 'crusade' (Smith 2022) against the threat of invasion by 'gay

pride' (Wingfield 2022), and also referring to Putin as a 'defender of the fatherland' (Patriarch Kirill 2022). Francis spoke to Kirill by video chat as early as 16 March 2022. According to the pope, Kirill spent the first 20 minutes of the conversation reading the pope the justifications for the war from a sheet of paper.

Later, Francis urged Kirill not to be 'a state cleric [...] not to use the language of politics, but that of Jesus' and not to become 'Putin's altar boy' (Pope Francis 2022a). It seems that, apart from this formal discussion, nothing was achieved on the occasion. After the conversation, Francis had hoped to meet Kirill in person in Jerusalem in June 2022, but the event was cancelled by the pope after Vatican diplomats expressed concern that such a meeting 'could lead to much confusion' (Staff 2022). Such a decision indicates the influence of public opinion on the pope, who had already been criticised for not taking a moral stand with the Ukrainians (Mikhelidze 2023). Due to the cancellation of the meeting in Jerusalem, some argue that Francis was not interested at all and was trying to distance himself from Patriarch Kirill (Nemeth 2023), but this can be debated. In fact, the meeting was only postponed, and the church leaders were to meet in a conference in Kazakhstan in November 2022, but when the time came, the Patriarch of Moscow did not attend (Euronews 2022). Furthermore, Francis' willingness to meet was demonstrated in February 2023, when the Holy See's diplomatic representatives announced that the pope was still seeking a meeting with Kirill, albeit no more specific dates or venues were announced (TASS 2023). Such delays in the timing and dates of meetings suggest that a meeting with the pope is not desirable for either Patriarch Kirill or Putin, who is likely to influence Patriarch Kirill's stance to some extent. Such a meeting appears to be an attempt by Francis to seek and establish communication links for possible peace mediation with Russia. These broken links of the pope with key Russian officials supports the argument that the mediatory role of the pope, despite Francis' efforts, is limited.

Since the beginning of the war, Francis has tried to actively contribute to the resolution of the conflict.

On the one hand, the pope has used one of the most effective political tools at his disposal: public communication. He visited several voluntary organisations, thanking them and trying to inspire them to continue their 'good deeds' in dealing with the consequences of the war (Bylina 2022). The pontiff also attempted to take more concrete political action. In 2023, the Holy See announced the pope's involvement in a 'peace mission to end the war in Ukraine' (Mortensen 2023), although both Russia and Ukraine later denied knowing anything about it (Krebs and Chance 2023). It is difficult to see the exact role of Francis in mediating this conflict, which in this case indicates the insignificance of the Holy See in this geopolitical event. With some calling his attempts 'failed from the very outset' (Mikhelidze 2023, 4), the ultimate role of Pope Francis and the outcome of his efforts to present himself as a mediator remain unsuccessful, as no tangible results have been achieved and Francis' mediation has been rejected by the conflicting countries (at least by Russia).

Conclusion.

In conclusion, several observations can be made. The Holy See's policy of neutrality exhibits a historical continuity and has previously been successful, justifying Pope Francis' desire to apply such a policy to the war in Ukraine on a theoretical basis. However, unlike his predecessors, Francis is less aligned with the West. His distinct cultural background has shaped his unique perspective on global peace and security. Thus, while his policy of neutrality allows him to maintain a non-aligned stance from a pro-Western approach, Francis may also be inclined to sympathise with other geopolitical factors and powers, such as Russia, due to closer parallels in political vision.

At the start of the war, Francis' rhetoric and public stance remained consistent with previous papal statements. Francis condemned the aggression as such, but did not name the aggressor or blame Russia directly. Viewing the war in Ukraine as a proxyconflict, a 'playing field' in which the 'big

players' were to blame, Francis avoided attributing exclusive blame to Russia. Such a perception stems from his positive relations with Russia before the war, and as the war rages on, the pope's public rhetoric suggests that to some extent he still views Russia in a positive light. By attributing aggression to ethnic minorities or by citing 'global interests', Francis sidestepped acknowledging Russia's role as the sole aggressor. Additionally, his limited understanding of the historical and cultural context of Eastern Europe may also have contributed to this perception, but the pope's evolving stance on the issue of arms supplies indicates a developing understanding of the conflict. Nevertheless, his policy of neutrality aims to avoid alienating the Vatican from either side of the conflict, successfully maintaining a neutral position.

Since the outbreak of the war, Pope Francis has taken political steps to mediate and resolve the conflict, including a significant visit to the Russian embassy. Pope Francis has actively sought to play the role of mediator, expressing a willingness to visit the capitals of both sides, rather than showing his support by visiting only one. Despite Francis' attempts to reach out to Russia through figures like Patriarch Kirill, the postponement of meetings and the lack of direct contact with Putin suggest Russia's reluctance to accept the Holy See's mediation in the war. Considering the period under discussion, Francis' attempt to position himself as a mediator, despite a successful policy of neutrality, appears unsuccessful. With Putin's determination to win the war to ensure the survival of the regime (Dixon and Belton 2023), it is unlikely that the Holy See's mediation would be accepted for any major peace treaty. However, if Russia finds itself unable to continue the conflict and seeks an exit strategy, there might be an opportunity for the Apostolic See to play the role of mediator. Otherwise, Francis' efforts are unlikely to yield fruitful results.

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