



Pope Francis reads his message during the Angelus noon prayer from the window of his studio overlooking St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Sunday, March 10, 2024. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

Susie Blann

[View Author Profile](#)

Associated Press

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

Kyiv, Ukraine — March 11, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Ukrainian and allied officials Sunday criticized [Pope Francis](#) for saying that Kyiv should have the “courage” to negotiate an end to [the war with Russia](#), a statement many interpreted as a call for Ukraine to surrender.

The foreign ministers of Ukraine and Poland, a vocal ally of Kyiv, condemned the pope’s remarks. And a leader of one of Ukraine’s Christian churches on Sunday said that only the country’s determined resistance to [Moscow's full-scale invasion](#), launched by Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) on Feb. 24, 2022, had prevented a mass slaughter of civilians.

In an interview recorded last month with Swiss broadcaster RSI and partially released on Saturday, Francis used the phrase “the courage of the white flag” as he argued that Ukraine, facing a possible defeat, should be open to peace talks brokered by international powers.

“Our flag is blue and yellow. We live, die and win under it. We will not raise other flags,” Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba posted on Sunday on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski tweeted: “How about, for balance, encouraging Putin to have the courage to withdraw his army from Ukraine? Peace would immediately ensue without the need for negotiations.”

In his tweet, Kuleba urged the Holy See to “not repeat historical mistakes” as he alleged that the Vatican didn't do enough to resist Nazi Germany. Yet he also invited Francis to Ukraine, saying the pope's visit would show support for the “more than a million Ukrainian (Roman) Catholics, more than 5 million Greek Catholics, all Christians and all Ukrainians.”

The head of Ukraine's Greek Catholic Church, Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, said Sunday that surrender isn’t on the minds of Ukrainians.

Advertisement

“Ukraine is exhausted, but it stands and will endure. Believe me, it never crosses anyone’s mind to surrender. Even where there is fighting today: listen to our people in Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Odesa, Kharkiv, Sumy,” Shevchuk said while meeting with Ukrainians in New York City. He mentioned the regions that have been under heavy Russian artillery and drone attacks.

Shevchuk also spoke of the brutality of Moscow’s invasion, referencing the town near Kyiv where Russian occupation left hundreds of civilians dead in the streets and in mass graves. He argued that the gruesome scenes seen in Bucha would have been “just an introduction” if not for Ukrainians' fierce resistance as Russian troops marched on the capital in February 2022.

Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni on Saturday clarified that the pope supported “a stop to hostilities (and) a truce achieved with the courage of negotiations,” rather than an outright Ukrainian surrender. Bruni said that the journalist interviewing Francis used the term “white flag” in the question that prompted the controversial remarks.

“I think that the strongest one is the one who looks at the situation, thinks about the people and has the courage of the white flag, and negotiates,” Francis said, when asked to weigh in on the debate between those who say that Ukraine should agree to peace talks and those who argue that any negotiations would legitimize Moscow’s aggression.

Kyiv remains firm on not engaging directly with Russia on peace talks, and [Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#) has said multiple times that the initiative in peace negotiations must come from the country that has been invaded.

Throughout the war, Francis has tried to maintain the Vatican’s traditional diplomatic neutrality, but that has often been accompanied by apparent sympathy with the Russian rationale for invading Ukraine, such as when he noted that NATO was “barking at Russia’s door” with its eastward expansion.

In the RSI interview, Francis insisted that “negotiations are never a surrender.”

“When you see that you are defeated, that things are not going well, you have to have the courage to negotiate,” he said.

During the Angelus prayer on Sunday from the window overlooking St. Peter's Square, Francis said that he was praying "for peace in the tormented Ukraine and in the Holy Land."

"Let the hostilities which cause immense suffering among the civilian population cease as soon as possible," he said.

Elsewhere, both Ukraine and Russia reported civilian deaths on Sunday after overnight trading drone, missile and shelling attacks that also caused a fire at a Russian oil depot and targeted Ukrainian power stations, according to officials.

Ukrainian air defenses overnight shot down 35 out of 39 drones launched by Russia, air force commander Mykola Oleshchuk reported, following a 4½-hour barrage that officials said also targeted power stations.

Two people died under rubble after Iranian-made Shahed drones around midnight struck private homes and state offices in Dobropillya, a large Ukrainian-held town in the east, authorities said. A 66-year-old man was also reported killed by shelling in Chasiv Yar, northeast of Dobropillya.

In Myrnohrad, another eastern Ukrainian town, 11 civilians were wounded after Russian missiles overnight struck residential buildings, the local prosecutor's office reported. It also posted photos of rubble lining the courtyard outside a high-rise apartment building, its windows blown out, and of cars parked outside that appeared reduced to piles of twisted metal.

A woman also died in Russia's Kursk region, which borders Ukraine, after shells fired from Ukraine set her house on fire, while her husband suffered severe burns, local Gov. Roman Starovoit reported.

Starovoit also said that debris from a downed Ukrainian drone sparked a fire at an oil depot in the Kursk region.

Nine Ukrainian drones targeted the Belgorod region, another southern Russian province that borders Ukraine, overnight and on Sunday, according to local Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov. Later on Sunday, Russia's Defense Ministry said that three drones in total were shot down over the northern Leningrad and Novgorod regions, well over 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) from the Ukrainian border.

Earlier on Sunday, Russian media reported on a fire at an aircraft hangar near the main airport in St Petersburg, just kilometers (miles) from the Leningrad region, without specifying what caused it. According to the reports, two people were hospitalized with burns, and flights were briefly diverted away from the airport, Pulkovo.

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. [View the full series.](#)