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Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew leads the official door-opening ceremony of lower Manhattan's St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church, Nov. 2, 2021. (AP Photo/Ted Shaffrey, File)

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The top figure in Eastern Orthodox Christianity on Sunday declared that "Ukraine's sovereignty is not up for debate, nor can it be negotiated under the guise of diplomacy," as he celebrated Mass in Istanbul on the eve of the third anniversary of Russia's war in Ukraine.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, who is considered the "first among equals" in Eastern Orthodoxy, said any future peace agreement "must include Ukraine as an equal participant." He praised Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for his "tireless effort" to defend the country's independence.

Most Ukrainians identify as Orthodox Christians, though the country remains split between an independent church based in Kyiv and another aligned with Moscow.

Bartholomew, who has consistently shown support for Ukraine since the war began, recognized the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as independent from Moscow in 2019 — a move that prompted Russian Patriarch Kirill and the Russian Orthodox Church to sever contact.

"No force can extinguish the spirit of the people who refuse to be broken," Bartholomew said in his sermon at a Mass attended by relatives and friends of Ukrainian soldiers who are missing or believed to be held in Russian captivity. "No nation has the right to force its will upon another, and no power can erase a people's history."

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The service drew tears from the participating Ukrainians. Among them was Tetiana Tantsiura, whose husband Oleg Naradko, a soldier in Ukraine's 115th Mechanized Brigade, went missing in action in July 2022.

"It's hard to talk about," Tantsiura told the Associated Press, "He disappeared July 2022. Until this time, the current year, I don't know anything. I only hope that he is alive, and he will return in Ukraine."

Although Russian President Vladimir Putin has tried to justify the invasion of Ukraine in part as a defense of the Moscow-oriented Orthodox Church, leaders of both

Ukrainian Orthodox factions — and the country's significant Catholic minority — have strongly condemned the war.

Ukraine's consul general to Istanbul, Nedilskyi Roman, thanked the patriarch for his "personal and spiritual" support to Ukraine.

"Your prayers have given us the strength to stand and fight the insidious enemy for 3 years. Thank you for your personal and spiritual support to millions of Ukrainians around the world who were forced to leave their homes to save the lives of their children," Roman said.

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