



Media coverage of the Holy See's humanitarian aid for Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian War in the mass media

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Abstract. The objective of the study was to conduct an analysis of the representation of the Holy See through the prism of its humanitarian, spiritual, and diplomatic discourses within the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The research methodology was based on the synergy of theoretical analysis, relevance sampling, and frame analysis of publicistic publications of leading media resources of the world and the country from the period 2016-2026, as well as a structural-functional analysis of the Holy See's digital presence in the framework of information warfare. The media representation of the activities of the Holy See has undergone a fundamental paradigmatic transformation from philanthropy to realism. The shift from abstract to specific constructs within the media allowed the Vatican to function as a logistical hub in the provision of assistance to Ukraine in relation to its energy and medical crises. Furthermore, the Vatican's digital presence has facilitated the formation of numerous international solidarity networks, despite its vulnerability to the decontextualisation of its content within the information wars framework. The use of positive neutrality within the media was justified through the use of specific humanitarian actions that facilitated the restoration of the international legal order within Ukraine's peace formula. Overall, the functioning of the Vatican as a global moral arbiter within the multipolar world order depends upon its ability to translate spiritual authority into infrastructural outcomes. The significance of these findings can be utilised by specialists in the field of international relations, religious studies, and media to counter the deleterious influences of information warfare, as well as to optimise the relationship between religious and secular societies during periods of crisis

Keywords: positive neutrality; media resource; social solidarity; institutional realism; digital ecosystem; mediation

INTRODUCTION

The media representation of the Vatican's humanitarian initiatives within the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war emerges as a locus of collision between religious diplomacy, ethics, and geopolitical narratives. In the information space of the twenty-first century, a cognitive dissonance is observed between the magnitude of the Holy See's actual philanthropic activity and the perception of its political stance, which often leads to a distorted or fragmentary coverage of aid in the media. The problem lies in the vulnerability of humanitarian content to instrumentalisation by various actors in the information war. A scholarly analysis of this discourse is

essential for identifying the efficacy of Vatican media communications amidst a crisis of trust, as well as for understanding how digital and traditional mass media transform religious peacemaking activity into social symbols comprehensible to global society. Thus, studying the methods of framing Vatican aid will allow for the development of strategies to overcome information barriers and ensure an adequate reflection of the role of international institutions in mitigating the humanitarian consequences of war.

An analysis of the scholarly discourse has enabled an examination of the Vatican's media representation

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as a result of the interaction between religious dogmatics and geopolitical contexts. While studying media resources, B. Synchak *et al.* (2023) substantiated that the coverage of Pope Francis's humanitarian efforts is characterised by inconsistency and fragmentation. The authors established that the media discourse oscillates between a positive fixation on philanthropic initiatives and a critical analysis of diplomatic decisions, which were labelled as diplomatic flexibility. The study's scholarly conclusion was that such contradictory perception was conditioned by the specificity of the Vatican strategy, where doctrinal principles entered into a pragmatic conflict with the principle of neutrality in the context of an armed conflict. These theses correlate with the findings of V. Turenko (2023), who proved that under conditions of a full-scale war, the social mission of religious institutions transformed into a means of expressing an ideological position and civic solidarity. The researcher identified a differentiation in approaches to humanitarian support among various Orthodox denominations, where the nature of aid became a defining factor of their organisational identity. Thus, common vectors of work regarding the civilian population were identified; however, a divergence in the methods of implementing humanitarian strategies was recorded.

Simultaneously, O. Kostiuk (2024) ascertained the existence of a dissonance between the official position of the Holy See and the expectations of Ukrainian society. The research confirmed the limited influence of Vatican diplomacy on concrete political decisions, despite its ability to adjust public opinion in specific religious regions. The author demonstrated that the absence of a direct moral differentiation of the parties in the Vatican's media rhetoric influenced the perception of the Holy See as a mediator in conflict resolution. Complementing this analysis, H. Nadtoka & I. Horpynchenko (2025) established the presence of a historically conditioned continuity in the Apostolic See's policy of avoiding direct identification of the subjects of aggression. The scholars discovered that the aspiration to preserve diplomatic channels of communication came into conflict with traditional notions of just wars, which was identified as a key factor of contemporary Vatican policy. P. Smytsnyuk (2023a) substantiated that the Holy See's restrained reaction was, in fact, underpinned by a transition from the theory of "just war" to the concept of "just peace". The researcher established that the specificity of Pope Francis's position was conditioned by his refusal to interpret events from a single viewpoint. It was demonstrated that, in this manner, the Vatican's neutrality was transformed from a formal-legal status into an instrument of global mediation, aimed at overcoming bipolar political thought.

The scholarly opinion of foreign studies emphasised paradigmatic shifts and the ethical aspects of neutrality, which directly influenced the Vatican's global media image. This direction was developed by

M. Thureau (2024), who confirmed the relevance of the "just peace" concept as an alternative to the "just war" doctrine. The author demonstrated that Christian ethics, under conditions of full-scale aggression, insists on maintaining the primacy of civilian settlement and the building of just structures. The study recorded that this paradigmatic shift created a theoretical foundation for seeking a way out of the conflict beyond purely military resolution. However, K. McLarren (2023) characterised such rhetorical restraint as a systemic strategy for avoiding the direct legal qualification of Russia's actions. The researcher discovered that the lack of verbal identification of the aggressor influenced the perception of the moral and legal foundations for protecting state sovereignty. Thus, it was proved that in media discourse, the unspoken became a factor that prompted a discussion on the efficacy of traditional religious diplomacy in addressing contemporary security crises. Similarly, F. Mabile (2023) compared the Vatican's status to the neutrality of states such as Switzerland or Finland, underscoring that the Holy See's passive positioning was interpreted as a challenge to the institution of neutrality. The researcher found that the claim to the role of a universal moral authority came into contradiction with the principle of political non-intervention. It was established that this choice became a critical factor in the transformation of the Vatican's role in the modern international system. In the context of the media framing of the war's humanitarian consequences, N. Roman *et al.* (2020) recorded the absence of a unified global standard in representing the crisis of displaced persons. The scholars identified a divergence in the framing of events: while English-language publications prioritised statistical data, Ukrainian and Russian media focused on the applied aspects of social adaptation. The study demonstrated the absence of traditional negative frames concerning Ukrainians in Western discourse, evidencing the dependence of humanitarian journalism on geographical proximity to the conflict and the political priorities of states.

Despite the existence of research dedicated to the political neutrality of the Holy See, a comprehensive analysis of the media transformation of Pope Francis's purely religious and moral appeals into concrete social norms within the digital ecosystem has eluded scholarly attention. Furthermore, the adaptability of media messages on aid in relation to the escalation of hostilities, which conditions dynamic changes in the Vatican's image as a global moral authority, remains insufficiently examined. Therefore, the objective of the study was an analysis of the media representation of the Vatican's humanitarian and religious-ethical discourse during the Russo-Ukrainian war. To achieve the stated objective, the following tasks were delineated: to determine the specificity of the media representation of the Vatican's humanitarian, spiritual, and diplomatic vectors; to investigate the influence of social networks on the

dissemination of peace appeals; and to analyse the transformation of the Vatican's media strategies throughout the Russo-Ukrainian war.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study constituted a theoretical and applied analysis of the media representation of the humanitarian, spiritual, and diplomatic activities of the Holy See across the dynamics of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The chronological framework of the research encompassed the period from 2016 to 2026, thereby enabling an examination of the evolution of Vatican discourse from the localised phase of confrontation through the stage of full-scale aggression to the prospects of post-war recovery. The research employed the method of theoretical analysis, whereby the Holy See was examined as a "soft power" actor within the system of international relations. The material basis for applying this method was the provisions of the Lateran Pacts (specifically Art. 24) (1929). The application of this method made it possible to define the juridical foundation of Vatican neutrality and to substantiate the conceptual transition from the classical doctrine to the model of "positive neutrality".

The empirical base of the study was compiled using a purposive, relevance-based sampling method, resulting in a corpus of 22 publications. The inclusion criteria for sources in the analytical array were as follows: direct reference to humanitarian or diplomatic initiatives of the Holy See concerning Ukraine; the presence of terminological framing of the Pontificate's activities; and publication in authoritative media resources with a high level of credibility and global or nationwide reach. Conversely, the exclusion criteria were: duplication of news reports lacking authorial interpretation (reprints of press releases); materials containing only a cursory mention of the Vatican outside the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war; publications in anonymous sources or resources with unverified reputation.

The method of frame analysis was applied to investigate the media representation of Vatican initiatives in chronological retrospect across three key vectors: humanitarian, spiritual, and diplomatic. Within the humanitarian vector, publications concerning material and technical support were analysed in the outlets Vatican News (Kotsur, 2021; The Vatican will..., 2022; Shumylo, 2023; Capelli, 2025; Kotsur 2025). The analytical materials also included publications from New Voice (The Vatican has..., 2018; Vatican delivers generators..., 2026) and EWTN News/Catholic News Agency (Brockhaus, 2020). The spiritual vector was examined through the prism of pastoral care and socio-psychological solidarity, based on materials from the outlet Novynarnia (The Pope mentioned..., 2016; Klischuk, 2024) and Radio Free Europe (2023). Furthermore, materials from Barron's (Melki & Ritchie, 2022) and DAGENS (Frich, 2024) were analysed within the context of spiritual support, alongside publications on

Vatican News's social media profiles on X (Pope Leo XIV appeals..., 2025) and Instagram (Reflection from Pope..., 2026).

The diplomatic vector and the strategy of "positive neutrality" were analysed through the publications of V. Saakov (2023), Pope's envoy to visit Moscow on peace mission (2023), and D. Braslavsky (2023). Additionally, materials by Ukrinform (2023; 2024), J. McElwee (2025), I. Koshiw & R. Dixon (2025) were incorporated. The application of this method was essential for analysing the key informational constructs ("financial transparency", "ethics of presence", "infrastructural partnership", "geopolitical realism") and the contextual adaptation to security challenges. The differentiation criteria for media texts were defined by the linguo-semantic markers of the messages: the metaphysical – employing theologemes and ethical categories; and the rational – featuring verified quantitative indicators (funding volumes, technical specifications of equipment, logistical timelines) and an emphasis on infrastructural effectiveness. The analysis of the publications was conducted according to the following parameters: periodisation, type of media resource, object of aid/act of diplomacy, frame, and features of contextualisation of the message.

The method of structural-functional analysis made it possible to investigate the situation of the Vatican in the digital world and in the war for the information space, as well as the specificities of its communication with the youth audience. The object of analysis was the functional capabilities of the X social network (Pope Leo XIV appeals to young people on the example of his life, 2026) and Instagram social network (Reflection by Pope Francis on the state of the world, 2026). As a result of the research, it became possible to establish the mechanisms of forming solidarity from abroad based on the verification of metrics on the social networks. The approaches to interpreting the results of the research are based on the principles of systematicity and objectivity, making it possible to analyse the functioning of the Vatican's communication strategy in the information age.

RESULTS

Humanitarian vector:

Material-technical support and infrastructural recovery

The Holy See functions within the system of international relations as a soft power actor whose institutional influence is grounded in moral and ethical authority, the right of active and passive legation, and the capacity for international arbitration in the absence of mechanisms of military or economic coercion (Storoška, 2025). The juridical foundation of its international legal status is enshrined in Article 24 of the Lateran Pacts (1929). According to Article 24, the Holy See is defined as a neutral state that maintains a position of impartiality regarding interstate territorial and political disputes. An exception to this rule occurs when conflicting

parties jointly appeal to the Apostolic See for the purpose of undertaking a mediatory or peace-making mission. In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the classical doctrine of neutrality has undergone a conceptual transformation and assumed the form of positive neutrality (Smytsnyuk, 2023b). This scholarly definition, introduced by the Cardinal Secretary of State of the Holy See, Pietro Parolin, delineates a specific model of diplomatic activity amidst the security crises of the 21st century. It incorporates such components as the dichotomy of engagement, the instrumental function, and ethical mediation. In contrast to passive neutrality, this model presupposes a dynamic adaptation of ecclesiastical institutions to the escalation of hostilities, wherein humanitarian activity becomes the principal means of the Holy See's international agency (Smytsnyuk, 2023a).

The humanitarian activity of the Holy See in addressing the consequences of the armed conflict is characterised by a transition from localised initiatives in 2014 (following the Russian aggression, the annexation of Crimea, and the Anti-Terrorist Operation) to large-scale logistical operations during the 2022-2026 period (prompted by Russia's full-scale invasion of

Ukraine on 24 February 2022) (Zavadilová, 2023). This transformation mirrors a shift in the Vatican's strategic priorities: from providing initial assistance to systemic participation in infrastructural recovery and ensuring the viability of affected regions. The instrument for implementing this policy was the Dicastery for the Service of Charity, under the leadership of Cardinal Konrad Krajewski. The activity of this institutional body during the period of full-scale escalation is directed towards the diversification of logistical chains, specialised medical support, and direct humanitarian presence. Thus, the Vatican's humanitarian vector integrates elements of classical philanthropy and crisis management, enabling the Holy See to retain the role of an active subject of international humanitarian security. The efficacy of implementing the positive neutrality model has been reflected in media discourse, where the representation of the Vatican's humanitarian initiatives adapts to the demands of global society. The systematisation of media messages facilitated an examination of the transition from financial reporting to infrastructural partnership concerning the Holy See's humanitarian activity (Table 1).

Table 1. Analysis of media representation of the Holy See's humanitarian activity (2018-2026)

Period/stage of war	Media resource (type)	Object of aid/event	Dominant media frame	Contextual adaptation of the message
2018 (Localisation of conflict)	New Voice (Secular, Ukr.)	EUR 16 million for Donbas	Financial Transparency	Validation of the Holy See's status as a relevant subject of international financial donation
2019 (Process Stagnation)	EWTN/CNA (Religious, Intl.)	1 million beneficiaries of the "Pope for Ukraine" project	Global Effectiveness	Legitimation of transnational fundraising through the demonstration of statistical indicators of the aid's impact factor
2021 (Period Preceding Full-Scale Aggression)	Vatican News (Official, Vatican)	Equipment for a hospital in Mariupol	Humanitarian Targetedness	Construction of the image of a depoliticised institution by emphasising social protection of vulnerable population groups
2022 (Outset of Invasion)		Collection of medicines and food in the Vatican	Mobilisational Readiness	Positioning of the religious centre as an operational logistical node within the crisis response system
2023-2024 (Protracted War)		Missions of K. Krajewski and the work of Caritas	Ethics of Presence	Communication strategy of personalising solidarity and visualising direct presence in high-security-risk zones
2025 (Energy Crisis)	New Voice (Secular, Intl.)	80 generators in Fastiv	Infrastructural Partnership	Rationalisation of humanitarian discourse and a shift from metaphysical narratives to the description of technical and technological support
2025-2026 (Prospect of Recovery)	Vatican News (Official, Vatican)	EUR 25 million in support of the Church	Strategic Recovery	Formation of a vision of long-term institutional sustainability and regeneration of Ukraine's social infrastructure

Source: compiled by the author based on The Vatican has allocated 16 million euros in two years to people affected by the war in Donbas (2018), H. Brockhaus (2020), T. Kotsur (2021), The Vatican will collect medicine and food for victims of the war in Ukraine (2022), J. Shumylo (2023), L. Klischuk (2024), T. Kotsur (2025), Vatican delivers generators, medicine to freezing Ukraine (2026)

Systematisation of the data presented in the table has revealed a pattern in the transformation of the Holy See's media image, wherein humanitarian discourse serves as an instrument for legitimising its international subjectivity. In the initial stages of the conflict, media representation was predicated on the principles of financial accountability and large-scale donations, aimed at establishing the Vatican as a relevant global donor. However, with the onset of full-scale escalation in 2022, a shift in communication strategy can be observed: media outlets moved away from statistics and metaphysical categories of moral support towards the coverage of concrete infrastructural solutions. This phenomenon may be defined as the rationalisation, or desacralisation, of aid, where religious narratives cede ground to descriptions of technical and technological partnership, such as the supply of energy or medical equipment (Zavadilová, 2023).

The logic of the media's message adaptation attests to the Holy See's flexibility in responding to the dynamics of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Whereas during the period of frontline stabilisation the emphasis was placed on long-term statistical indicators of impact factor to attract transnational benefactors, at moments of critical threat to energy and medical security, media focused on the operational efficiency of logistical chains (The Vatican will..., 2022). The strategy of personalised solidarity, implemented through the coverage of the Papal Almoner's missions directly in high-security-risk zones, warrants separate consideration. Notably, Cardinal Krajewski's visits to Ukraine shifted the tone of aid coverage towards a more existential register (Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine, 2024). During the period of energy terror in 2025, media shifted their focus to the technological aspect of support: "Three trucks carrying 80 electricity generators and medical supplies arrived in Fastiv, providing a vital shield against the winter darkness" (Vatican delivers generators..., 2026). In conclusion, the media representation of the Vatican's humanitarian vector constructs a vision of long-term institutional resilience, wherein the Holy See emerges not merely as a benefactor, but as a guarantor of the

regeneration of Ukraine's social infrastructure in the perspective of post-war recovery.

The spiritual and socio-psychological dimension: Pastoral care and media influence

The spiritual and socio-psychological dimension of the Holy See's pastoral care is characterised by a shift in emphasis towards the concept of personalistic accompaniment in crisis states (Zavadilová, 2023). Within this paradigm, religious institutions are transformed into functional hubs of psychological rehabilitation and the stabilisation of national identity during crisis states of society. The practical implementation of this approach in Ukraine can be traced through the reformatting of the parish network activities of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic Churches (Szalajko, 2026). Monastic and church complexes integrate spiritual care with the provision of humanitarian aid and shelter, performing the functions of civil defence centres. Attention is accorded to digital evangelisation as a tool for communication with youth audiences. The Vatican's use of specialised platforms, particularly in the context of the Jubilee of Digital Missionaries and Catholic Influencers (n.d.) initiatives, is aimed at creating networks of social solidarity that function as an alternative to algorithmic models of digital consumption. Such a strategy seeks to minimise the risks of youth digital isolation and to counteract destructive informational influences. Ethical discourse is shaped through the rhetoric of a "suffering people", where systematic calls for prayerful support for Ukraine facilitate the interpretation of military aggression as a violation of fundamental sacred norms (Zavadilová, 2023). The Holy See's media strategy, implemented through Vatican News resources, accentuates the moral and ethical aspects of the Church's presence in the information space, thereby upholding the Apostolic See's status as a subject of global humanitarian communication even amidst political multipolarity. Analysis of the media representation of the spiritual vector has made it possible to identify the specifics of forming solidarity networks through the rhetoric of the "suffering people" and the pastoral call (Table 2).

Table 2. Media representation of spiritual-motivational support and solidarity (2016-2025)

Period/stage of war	Media resource (type)	Object of aid/event	Dominant media frame	Contextual adaptation of the message
2016 (Initial phase of the conflict)	Novynarnia (Secular, Ukrainian)	Christmas message "Urbi et Orbi"	Global Inclusion	Integration of the Ukrainian question into the global religious agenda to prevent the informational isolation of the conflict
2022 (Refugee crisis)	Barron's (International, business)	Call for the protection of migrants (Malta case)	Universal Hospitality	Extrapolation of biblical narratives onto the contemporary crisis of displaced persons from Ukraine to stimulate European solidarity
2023 (Holodomor Anniversary)	RFE/RL (International, secular)	Reference to "martyred Ukraine" and the Holodomor	Historical Continuity of Suffering	Drawing cognitive parallels between past genocides and contemporary aggression to strengthen the moral legitimacy of Ukraine's defence

Table 2, Continued

Period/stage of war	Media resource (type)	Object of aid/event	Dominant media frame	Contextual adaptation of the message
2024 (Energy terror / Winter)	Unity.gov.ua (Governmental, Ukrainian)	Call for prayer and aid for children	Seasonal Solidarity	Adaptation of a pastoral address to current security challenges (winter period) with the aim of mobilising civilian support
2024 (Neutrality discourse)	DAGENS.com (Secular, international)	Advocacy of neutrality and aid	Ethical Pragmatism	Theoretical substantiation of the interrelation between the Holy See's neutral status and the effectiveness of its humanitarian access
2025 (War)	Vatican News (Official, Vatican)	Solidarity mission of Pope Leo	Personalistic Accompaniment	Transmission of the concept of the Apostolic See's uninterrupted spiritual presence as a stable moral compass amidst crisis

Source: compiled by the author based on The Pope mentioned Ukraine in his Christmas message and sent 6 million euros for Donbas (2016), C. Melki & A. Ritchie (2022), Radio Free Europe (2023), K. Frich (2024), L. Klischuk (2024), B. Capelli (2025)

An analysis of the data presented in the table has revealed a consistent pattern in the formation of the Holy See's spiritual-motivational narrative, wherein religious meanings are adapted to the shifting security context. During the initial stages, media representation focused on the symbolic inclusion of the Ukrainian question within the global agenda; however, as the Russo-Ukrainian war progressed, a transition toward more complex ethical constructs can be observed. Specifically, the use of historical analogy allows the media to interpret the events of the war through the prism of collective trauma. Recalling the anniversary of the Holodomor, the pontiff defined the current aggression as a prolonged collective trauma, emphasising the historical continuity of suffering: "This open wound, instead of healing, is made even more painful by the atrocities of war, which are causing this martyred people to suffer once again" (Radio Free Europe, 2023). Such rhetoric shifts the discourse from the geopolitical plane to the category of defending fundamental sacral norms. One aspect of media adaptation has been the extrapolation of universal Christian values onto concrete humanitarian challenges. Amidst the migration crisis, the media broadcasts call for solidarity rooted in biblical narratives, thereby stimulating the formation of a culture of hospitality within the European space. The pontiff stressed that assisting displaced persons constitutes a test of humanity: "Assisting those fleeing from conflicts and poverty should not be seen as a burden, but as an opportunity to show human solidarity" (Melki & Ritchie, 2022). This attests to the Vatican's use of "soft power" to coordinate the international community's ethical response to the consequences of war, where religious authority acts as a stabilising factor. The logic of media coverage of pastoral care also demonstrates a pragmatism of appeals during critical periods, particularly during the energy terror (in this context, the winter of 2024). The media adapts addresses to the faithful, focusing on the protection of vulnerable population groups: "Pope Francis recalled the Ukrainian children and adolescents who are suffering without heating amidst a very severe winter during this period"

(Klischuk, 2024). In conclusion, the spiritual vector in the media legitimises the concept of "positive neutrality", presenting the Vatican as an entity that provides uninterrupted personalist accompaniment to the afflicted. Thus, the Holy See has established a system of humanitarian communication that is efficient regardless of the state of the world politics.

An analysis of the activities of the Holy See in the digital media space demonstrated the ability of the Holy See to adapt to the conditions of the digital ecosystem. The efforts of Pope Francis to establish a presence on social media platforms such as X and Instagram garnered the attention of a multi-million audience (Crawl, 2018). Following his successor, Leo XIV, organised the "Jubilee of Digital Missionaries" in 2025 (Collins, 2025). During this event, the Holy See declared a shift away from the consumption of digital media towards the creation of "networks of solidarity" that would act as an alternative to the content feeds that social media platforms offer to their users. Despite the benefits of such a change, as revealed through the analysis of the media space, the efforts of the Holy See are challenged by the informational war. The messages of the Holy See can be exploited by the use of echo chambers and algorithmic filters that determine the information that individuals view on social media platforms (Jureńczyk *et al.*, 2025).

An analysis of specific cases within the digital communication of the Holy See allowed the translation of theoretical conclusions concerning the practice of the digital pontificate into verified data. The publication of the text *Reflection by Pope Leo XIV* (2026) on Instagram received 29.4 thousand likes and enabled the Holy See to cross linguistic barriers between its various continents (as of March 2026). The comments to the text were published in over 900 comments in Italian, Spanish, and English, indicating the presence of a global network of supporters of the Holy See. However, due to the nature of Instagram's communication platform, the message was reduced to a visual "lifestyle" message of the Holy See, rather than a message directed towards the theological primary source of the Catholic church.

Consequently, the message was vulnerable to being perceived in a superficial manner by the audiences on the social media platform.

Conversely, the publication of the message on X social media platform indicates one strategy of the Holy See to combat the dissemination of fake news (Pope Leo XIV appeals..., 2026). The social media channel garnered a total of 1 million views for the message, with 4 thousand shares of the message and 19 thousand likes to the message as of March 2026. The publication of the message in the form of a quote from the popes enabled the Holy See to fill the information vacuum within the conflict zones without the dissemination of fake news. Thus, the verification of the messages of the Holy See continues to be essential for the organisation in order to avoid the use of their communication channels as instruments of information-psychological influence.

The Vatican's diplomatic efforts – the strategy of “positive neutrality” and mediation

The diplomacy of the Holy See is based on the principles of so-called “positive neutrality”, which implies the active involvement of the Holy See in solving the humanitarian aspects of a conflict (Storoška, 2025). One of the instruments of the Holy See in achieving such a goal was the mission of Cardinal Matteo Zuppi (Zarembo, 2023). The cardinal performed official visits to

Kyiv, Washington, and Beijing. During his mission, he successfully facilitated the repatriation of children that were deported from Ukraine and also managed the exchange of prisoners of war. Thus, the Holy See experienced a transition towards the performance of specialised tasks within the legal and humanitarian field. A new dimension in the role of the mediator emerged in November 2025, when Ukraine approached the Holy See with a proposal to establish the Vatican as a platform for negotiating the release of the country's civilian hostages (Winfield & Novikov, 2025). Such an appeal by Ukraine indicates the Holy See's recognised capabilities regarding humanitarian issues. A new stage in the Vatican's foreign policy, associated with the pontificate of Leo XIV (from 08.05.2025), is the move towards institutional realism (Storoška, 2025). The cardinal has dedicated his efforts towards both the defence of the existing international security architecture, as well as the strengthening of the rhetoric concerning the inadmissibility of the use of nuclear weaponry by any of the actors involved in the war between Ukraine and Russia. In particular, the Holy See voiced support for the extension and modernisation of strategic offensive arms agreements, which positions the Vatican as an active defender of the global legal order and a proponent of legal deterrence in conditions of multipolarity. A detailed breakdown by stages of diplomatic activity and corresponding media frames is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Representation of the Holy See's diplomatic efforts in media discourse (2023-2025)

Period/mission	Media resource (type)	Diplomatic act/event	Dominant media frame	Contextual adaptation of the message
05.2023 (Mission Initiation)	Deutsche Welle (International, secular)	Appointment of Cardinal-Envoy for a ceasefire	Peacemaking Subjectivity	Emphasis on the Vatican's readiness for direct intervention in the conflict as an alternative diplomatic force
06.2023 (Shuttle Diplomacy)	Yevropeiska Pravda (Secular, Ukrainian)	Papal Envoy's visit to Moscow	Direct Mediation	Coverage of attempts to establish a direct dialogue with the RF, which media-wise substantiates the importance of maintaining neutral channels of communication
07.2023 (Global Track)	RBC-Ukraine (Secular, Ukrainian)	Discussion of the war in Washington via the envoy	Transatlantic Coordination	Shaping the Vatican's image as a mediator synchronising humanitarian effort with the world's leading powers
03.2024 (Ethical Advocacy)	Ukrinform (State-owned, Ukrainian)	Appeal for a just and lasting peace	Legal Idealism	Representation of the Vatican as a moral arbiter insisting on a diplomatic end to the war based on the principles of justice
04.2025 (Institutional Dialogue)	Reuters (International, business)	Vatican's negotiations with S. Lavrov	Diplomatic Pragmatism	Affirming the Holy See's ability to sustain communication amidst profound isolation between the conflicting parties
05.2025 (Renaissance Realism)	Washington Post (International, USA)	Mediation prospects under the pontificate of Leo XIV	Geopolitical Realism	Geopolitical Realism Constructing the image of a renewed Vatican as a key node in the future security architecture and negotiations
2025 (Political Rapprochement)	Synod of Bishops of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (Religious, Ukrainian)	Assurance of support for the “Peace Formula”	Value-Based Solidarity	Official affirmation of support for the Ukrainian vision of peace, harmonising religious ethics with Ukraine's national interests

Source: compiled by the author based on Pope's envoy to visit Moscow on peace mission (2023), Ukrinform (2023), V. Saakov (2023), D. Braslavsky (2023), Ukrinform (2024), J. McElwee (2025), I. Koshiw & R. Dixon (2025)

An analysis of the media representation of the Holy See's diplomatic activity has revealed patterns of transformation in the Vatican's foreign policy discourse, moving from declarative peace-making towards the concept of institutional realism. The systematisation of data in Table 3 demonstrated the evolution of media frames, which adapt to the shifting geopolitical context and the stages of the Russo-Ukrainian war. At the initial stage in 2023, media discourse focused on the initiation of Cardinal M. Zuppi's mission, where the Vatican was represented as an alternative diplomatic force. The frames of "peace-making subjectivity" and "direct mediation" in outlets such as Deutsche Welle (Saakov, 2023) and Yevropeiska Pravda (Pope's envoy to visit Moscow on peace mission, 2023) were aimed at legitimising the Holy See's right to maintain neutral channels of communication even under conditions of the aggressor's profound isolation. Subsequently, in the 2024-2025 period, a rationalisation of the diplomatic narrative is observed. Instead of general appeals for a ceasefire, the media began to accentuate diplomatic pragmatism and the specific outcomes of mediation. One aspect of the analysis involved the media's affirmation of the Vatican's functional role as a stable communication channel in a polarised world. Reuters highlighted this transition, noting: "The Holy See continues to discuss humanitarian issues and the return of prisoners, fulfilling its role as a persistent mediator in a polarised world" (McElwee, 2025). This confirmed that the media project the image of the Vatican not merely as a religious centre, but as a pragmatic mediator whose neutrality is a necessary prerequisite for resolving complex humanitarian issues, particularly the repatriation of deported children and prisoner-of-war exchanges.

Concurrently, the appearance of the geopolitical realism paradigm in the mass media published by international media also contributed to the prospects for mediation that were provided by the pontificate of Leo XIV. The Washington Post, for instance, wrote: "Could Pope Leo mediate between Russia and Ukraine? Many analysts see his pragmatic approach as a potential bridge for a future settlement" (Koshiw & Dixon, 2025). Here, the media began to envision the Vatican as a potential mediator in the future security architecture between the conflicting countries of Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the support that the Vatican provided for the Ukrainian "peace formula" began to take shape in the media as well. The Synod of Bishops of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church indicated that the fundamental aspirations of the Ukrainian people as expressed within the "peace formula" were in agreement with the media's conception of the Vatican's alignment with the country and its interests: "The Vatican assured the Catholic Church of Ukraine that the 'peace formula' meets the aspirations of the Ukrainian people, especially regarding its humanitarian aspects" (Ukrinform, 2023). Thus, the media representation of the Vatican in relation to

the military conflict indicated its flexibility in relation to the conflict, and led to the legitimisation of the strategy that employed the Vatican as a unique mediator in the conflict.

The systematisation and analysis of the media representation of the activities of the Holy See enabled an overview of the development of the Vatican's image within the media between 2016 and 2025. During this time, the Vatican transformed from a philanthropic organisation to an organisation that was also invested in the security of humanity's humanitarian conflicts. The various media publications reflected the shift of the organisation's priorities from philanthropy to humanitarian security. Furthermore, another element of the development of the Vatican within the media was the changing focus of its communications to the public. During the earlier portion of the reviewed time period (2014-2021), the communications of the Vatican to the media focused upon the foundation of its practices and its promise of financial transparency. After 2021, however, the organisation began to shift its communication to the media to highlight practices such as the provision of medical equipment to Eastern Europe, the construction of energy infrastructure (such as generators) in Eastern Europe, and the repatriation of the children and prisoners of war that were deported during the war.

Consequently, the performed analysis of the media representations of the Vatican during the 2016-2026 time period indicates that the Vatican did indeed transform from a religious organisation with humanitarian aims to one that was also realistic in its understanding of its capabilities as a mediator. The Vatican began to include elements like humanitarian logistics, religious care, and even specialised mediation into its communication to the public and as a general strategy for both the fulfilment of its religious and humanitarian commitments. Overall, then, the media has contributed to the establishment of the Vatican as a unique mediator for the world's conflicts.

DISCUSSION

The results of the conducted research confirmed that the media representation of the Holy See's activities during the Russo-Ukrainian war is a complex, multi-vector system that has transformed under the influence of security and digital challenges. The present study identified the Vatican's transition from symbolic peace-making to a model of institutional realism, a notion which finds theoretical substantiation in the work of S. Góra (2025). The author argued that Pope Francis's stance is based on the paradigm of a "culture of encounter", which converts Christian values of mercy into strategic diplomatic acts. These results fully coincide with the conclusions of the present study concerning the evolution of Vatican discourse. Both studies demonstrated that over a ten-year period (2014-2024), the Holy See managed to shape a new model of religious diplomacy, whereby

calls for dialogue are not passive but serve as a tool for the active legitimisation of international subjectivity through support for the victims of aggression.

The analysis of the media environment in the present study indicated a necessary condition for the visualisation of war in order to foster global solidarity. M. Costello & D.J. West (2022) established that international cable television created an effect of direct presence, which altered the perception of the humanitarian disaster in Ukraine. This approach correlates with the findings of the present study regarding the analysis of the ethics of presence. The media documentation of the presence of papal emissaries in risk zones amplifies this effect, transforming distant compassion into active engagement on the part of the global community. The researchers noted that, despite security risks and the withdrawal of journalists from hot spots, the Vatican preserved channels of personalistic accompaniment, thereby ensuring the continuity of media attention to Ukraine.

In examining the practical dimension of humanitarian aid, the efficacy of synergies between religious and volunteer structures was identified, which aligns with the findings of B.B. Brücher (2022). The author demonstrated that scholarly and veterans' organisations (such as the International Consortium of Research Excellence (INCORE) and the Theodor Billroth Academy (TBA)) are capable of ensuring the targeted delivery of medical assistance within the shortest possible time-frame by working directly with the Territorial Defence Forces of Ukraine. The results of the present study are contiguous with this position regarding the importance of direct logistics – the Vatican missions, analogously to the volunteer operations of European veterans, became the basis for the formation of the image of an operational logistics hub. Furthermore, the scholar's findings regarding support for Ukrainian medical students in Germany corroborated the conclusion that academic and religious support function as autonomous factors of international stability, independent of the political conjuncture. Particular attention within the context of analysing mechanisms of social stabilisation is merited by the work of S. Bylina (2022), which investigates the metaphysical instruments for the consolidation of religious communities in crisis conditions within media discourse. The researcher focused on the "Act of Consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary" as an instrument for consolidating the faithful and providing moral support to Ukrainian families. The findings of the aforementioned study are consonant with the conclusions of the present study concerning the analysis of the transformation of purely religious rituals into media symbols of solidarity. Within the framework of the present study, the conclusion was delineated that, in conditions of military confrontation, the pastoral rhetoric of the Pontiff becomes an effective mechanism for the desacralisation of pain and its transformation into a shared global responsibility, thereby integrating the

ethical imperatives of Christianity into the contemporary system of social communications.

The results of the analysis of diplomatic efficacy in the present study indicated the existence of objective limits to the soft power of religious institutions. R. Korniawan (2024) identifies that although religious approaches to conflict resolution were successful in various regions of the world, the Russo-Ukrainian war presented a significant challenge ("brain-drain") for the Vatican. This finding is in line with the conclusions of this research study regarding the need for synergy between the Vatican and the remainder of the global community. Both studies indicate the inability of the religious approaches to resolve conflicts between the great powers of the world. As such, the Vatican's use of media to propagate their message regarding the war was replaced with shuttle diplomacy to address the great powers involved. Furthermore, the hierarchisation of media coverage of the conflicts within the world correlates to the findings of E.V. Rodriguez (2024). E.V. Rodriguez documented the disproportionate media attention given to the conflicts in Ukraine and Yemen, indicating a double standard in the media according to the proximity of the conflict to the great powers of the world. Similar to the findings of the Vatican and its desire to avoid the perception of bias in its communications despite the racial and religious refugee crisis documented by S. Altam & G. DKokane (2023), the findings of both studies indicate the need for the Vatican to continually assess its communication methods to avoid accusations of bias regarding the conflicts within the world. Furthermore, the role of the news media in creating the consciousness of the public regarding the conflicts within the world indicates the importance of the findings of Q. Hao (2023). Q. Hao documented the importance of fairness and impartiality of the news media in the reporting of the crisis situations that unfolded around the world for the public and the great powers. The scholar's presented findings are fully aligned with the present study in the context that, during periods of hybrid threats, the integrity of correspondents serves as a safeguard against disinformation. The present study indicated that the Vatican, through its own channels (Vatican News), seeks to establish a standard of verified information, thereby enabling the neutralisation of manipulative narratives that emerge in commercial media resources.

The results of the analysis of linguistic strategies in the present study attested to the complexity of constructing the media image of war. J. Pawliszko (2025) demonstrated that the use of metaphors ("game", "path", "economy") and evaluative lexis in outlets such as The New York Times and The Guardian directly models the ideological perception of the war. The findings of the analysed study are contiguous with the present one regarding the influence of the socio-political context on media framing. Specifically, it was identified that the media representation of the Vatican also becomes an

object of linguistic framing, where the Pontiff's peace initiatives may be metaphorically described depending on the ideological stance of the media resource. Juxtaposing the data obtained in the present study with the work of J.M. Moreno-Mercado & J. García-Marín (2020) allowed for the identification of the dominance of geostrategic interests over journalistic standards in Iranian state media (HispanTV). The authors demonstrated that framing in media constitutes an instrument for legitimising the ambitions of the countries of origin, thereby creating fundamentally different informational worldviews. These conclusions are consonant with the results of the present study, insofar as the religious content of the Vatican may be subjected to deliberate instrumentalisation (as traced in HispanTV).

The analysis of the transformation of media ecology in the present study indicated the emergence of new digital practices that have altered the landscape of war journalism. F. Wilson *et al.* (2023) emphasised the importance of Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) and the documentation of war on social media, which has shifted the balance between official institutions and civic actors. The findings of the aforementioned study are consonant with the present one, as a complex interaction was identified between the Vatican's digital platforms and networked communities. The Vatican successfully integrated elements of digital performativity into its pastoral activity, enabling it to become an active agent shaping the perception of the geopolitical conflict through the prism of the personal documentation of civilian suffering. The examination of mediation issues in the present study attested to the existence of a contradiction in media discourse, as noted in the work of C. Escudero (2024). Using the example of Spanish media, the researcher established that 85% of materials employ the lexicon of "war journalism", which directly contradicts the principles of mediation. The scholar's research substantiated the need for the implementation of "culture of peace" training in newsrooms to correct journalistic practices. These findings are entirely consistent with the present study, particularly in the context that media coverage of Vatican mediation introduces confusion due to the binary simplification of the conflict.

Consequently, the convergence of technological innovations and religious ethics is forming a new type of media strategy – a "digital pontificate of solidarity". A critical juxtaposition of the data obtained with international experience demonstrated that the viability of the Holy See as a global arbiter depends on a balance between operational humanitarian logistics, the defence of the autonomy of science and culture, and the professional verification of its own messages in the digital environment. The identified synergy between institutional strategies and the actual needs of the affected population creates the conditions for overcoming barriers to information accessibility and affirming the principles of a just peace.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the conducted research made it possible to conclude that the representation of activities of the Holy See in the framework of the Russo-Ukrainian war experienced a fundamental paradigmatic transformation. Thus, within the analysis of the humanitarian vector of the Holy See's activities, it was established that the image of the Vatican changed from that of a traditional philanthropic organisation to an organisation that contributed to the humanitarian security of the conflicts. The analysis of the media discourse on the activities of the Vatican revealed the shift from the concept of "financial transparency" in the phase of the war between 2016 and 2018 to the concepts of "infrastructural partnership" and the "ethics of presence" in the period between 2022 and 2026. It was determined that the strategy of positive neutrality enabled the Holy See to function as an operational logistics hub, where religious dogmatics are integrated into concrete technical and technological solutions – from the supply of medical equipment to overcoming the energy crisis. Thus, humanitarian activity became the primary instrument for legitimising the Vatican's international agency in the context of a global crisis of trust.

The analysis of the spiritual and socio-psychological dimensions attested to the complex adaptation of pastoral care to the conditions of the digital ecosystem. It was revealed that the spiritual vector in the media legitimises the concept of "positive neutrality" through the rhetoric of a "suffering people", whereby military aggression is interpreted as a violation of fundamental sacred norms. Drawing media parallels between contemporary events and historical tragedies (notably the Holodomor) allowed for the strengthening of the moral legitimacy of Ukraine's defence and shifted the discourse from a purely geopolitical plane into the category of protecting human dignity. It was identified that the Holy See's digital presence on platforms such as X and Instagram contributed to the formation of transnational solidarity networks; however, it simultaneously exposed the vulnerability of religious content to algorithmic decontextualisation. The Vatican acts as the organiser of a global solidarity network that counteracts hate speech in the digital space. Concurrently, the documented change in the media consumption patterns of the Ukrainian audience confirmed the necessity of verifying the Pontiff's official messages in order to neutralise destructive informational and psychological influences within the "echo chambers" of social media.

Within the investigation of the diplomatic vector, the conceptual transition of Vatican foreign policy from declarative peace-making to "institutional realism" was substantiated. It was established that the reorientation towards highly specialised mediation (the repatriation of deported children, prisoner-of-war exchanges) and the official endorsement of the Ukrainian "peace formula" harmonised religious ethics with the demands

of restoring the international legal order. The development of the media adaptation of the Vatican under the pontificate of Leo XIV contributed to the consolidation of the vision of the future architecture of security in the form of legal outcomes.

The limitations of this study were conditioned by the high dynamics of the military conflict, the rapid development of digital technologies, as well as a lack of access to the non-public protocols of the Vatican. Such limitations introduce certain barriers to the unification of the media in the perspective of the long-term development of the Vatican's communication with the digital world. Further scholarly inquiry should be structured along three key directions: the development of analytical tools to counter the instrumentalisation of religious

discourse under conditions of the post-truth era; the investigation of the impact of generative artificial intelligence on the transformation of sacred communication and the mediatisation of religion; and the analysis of the role of religious diplomacy in the processes of post-war reconstruction of Ukraine's social infrastructure.

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Анотація. Метою дослідження було здійснити аналіз медійної репрезентації гуманітарного, духовного та дипломатичного дискурсів Святого Престолу в контексті російсько-української війни. Методологія роботи базувалася на синергії теоретичного аналізу міжнародно-правового статусу Ватикану, методу цільової релевантної вибірки та фрейм-аналізу масиву публікацій провідних світових та вітчизняних медіаресурсів (2016-2026), а також структурно-функціонального аналізу цифрової присутності Понтифікату в умовах інформаційного протистояння. У межах дослідження встановлено, що медійна репрезентація діяльності Святого Престолу зазнала докорінної парадигмальної трансформації, еволюціонувавши від традиційної філантропії до моделі інституційного реалізму та прагматичної гуманітарної безпеки. Зафіксовано послідовний перехід від абстрактних наративів (універсальної солідарності) до конкретних медійних конструкторів (інфраструктурного партнерства та етики присутності), що дозволило Ватикану функціонувати як оперативний логістичний вузол у подоланні енергетичних та медичних криз в Україні. Виявлено, що цифрова екосистема Понтифікату сприяла формуванню транснаціональних мереж солідарності, проте водночас викрила вразливість релігійного контенту до алгоритмічної деконтекстуалізації та інструменталізації в межах інформаційних воєн. Доведено, що стратегія позитивної нейтральності легітимізується у медіа через вузькоспеціалізовану медіацію (репатріація дітей, обмін полоненими), що гармонізує релігійну етику з вимогами відновлення міжнародного правопорядку та підтримкою української формули миру. Висновки підтвердили, що функціонування Ватикану як глобального морального арбітра в умовах багатополарності залежить від здатності конвертувати духовний авторитет у верифіковані інфраструктурні результати. Практичне значення результатів дослідження полягає у можливості їх використання фахівцями з міжнародних відносин, релігієзнавцями та медіааналітиками для розробки стратегій нейтралізації деструктивних інформаційних впливів та оптимізації комунікації між релігійними інституціями і світським суспільством у кризові періоди

Ключові слова: позитивна нейтральність; медіаресурс; соціальна солідарність; інституційний реалізм; цифрова екосистема; медіація