

1 December 2022

His Holiness, Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

Your Holiness,

We, Media Diversity Institute and the *Get The Trolls Out!* consortium are writing to you to express our dismay with your statements regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war. At Media Diversity Institute we work internationally to encourage accurate and nuanced reporting of race, religion, ethnic, class, disability, gender and sexual identity issues in media landscapes. Our project *Get The Trolls Out!* combats discrimination and intolerance based on religious grounds in Europe.

For several months, the world has been following the news of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Russia's aggression and the cruelty we have witnessed has been unspeakable. The parallel war that is fought on traditional media in Russia and on social media globally contribute to disinformation and untrustworthiness.

On 22 November 2022, you gave an [interview](#) to five representatives of America Magazine in which you discussed several issues including the war in Ukraine. We read it very carefully yet we were soon disappointed by your response. When asked about the war you responded:

'When I speak about Ukraine, I speak of a people who are martyred. If you have a martyred people, you have someone who martyrs them. When I speak about Ukraine, 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.** Certainly, the one who invades is the Russian state. This is very clear. 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.'

We would specifically like to emphasise the part of the statement which we have highlighted in bold. This statement falls into a disinformation narrative that have been widely used during the war. It implies that those of the Russian tradition – the tradition of Eastern Orthodox Christianity – are less cruel than those of different traditions. As is known, Chechens are Muslim, and a large majority of Buryats are Tibetan Buddhist.

The narrative of '[Siberia's savage warriors](#)' when referring to Buryats has been spread widely throughout the course of the war. It creates the image of brutal Mongolian looking warriors and implies that a small ethnic minority is responsible of some of worst war atrocities committed by the Russian Army in Ukraine. At the same time blaming Chechens, who are Muslims in their vast majority, creates anti-Muslim narratives, implies anti-Muslim notions, and

could lead to discrimination. In your interview you mentioned *'the one who invades is the Russian state'*. It is indeed a fact that the Russian state has been [using minorities](#) to fight and die in its war in disproportionate numbers.

Such narratives create divisions, spread disinformation and could lead to hate speech and even violence towards ethnic and religious minorities. Through our projects and our work in general we have been monitoring such narratives that are spread in the media for decades and we have seen the harm they could do to people. Thus, we were very disappointed when a religious leader of your demeanour, with such a large following and respect globally used such language of exclusion and division.

During your interview you mentioned that *'[t]he position of the Holy See is to seek peace and to seek an understanding'*. Yet there can be no peace of understanding when ethnic and religious minorities are targeted and blamed for crimes that a State commits.

Your holiness, we call on you to retract these statements and set the record straight so that we avoid more violence.

Yours sincerely,

Media Diversity Institute and *Get The Trolls Out!* consortium