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Does Vatican diplomacy have prospects of success in Ukraine?



The first person on President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's newly formed team in 2019 to propose involving Pope Francis in efforts to resolve the war between Russia and Ukraine — which began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of fighting in Donbas — was Andrii Yermak.

The then presidential adviser and now Zelenskyy's chief of staff, Yermak seemed, along with Zelenskyy, to genuinely believe that a negotiated settlement was within reach.

In response to my questions at the time, he said that bringing influential figures to the table could help pressure Russia into making peace and ending its aggression.

One of the key figures he mentioned was the Pope. To be honest, some diplomats and politicians were sceptical of the idea—but the status of the Holy See left little room to question the proposal.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy took genuine pride in his conversations with Pope Francis before the full-scale war began. On 8 February, 2020, he met the Pope in person during an official audience.

But their dialogue extended beyond that — on 30 June, 2021, for example, Zelenskyy spoke to the Pope again and invited him to visit Ukraine, as he often does to raise the country's profile on the international stage.

This May, Zelenskyy extended a similar **invitation** to Pope Leo XIV. The Zelenskyy couple also attended the Inauguration Mass alongside other international leaders, where they were among the first guests to be **received**.

Pope Leo is sending a clear message that peace in Ukraine should no longer be ignored. "I bring in my heart the suffering of the beloved people of Ukraine," Pope Leo **said** in his appeal for a "just, authentic and long-lasting" peace in Ukraine.

Vatican's diplomatic leverage

As one of the most influential institutions in Catholic countries, the Holy See carries considerable diplomatic leverage. Take the Global South, for example: President Lula da Silva has been fostering closer ties with Vladimir Putin — he even attended Russia's Victory Day parade on 9 May of this year.

Given that Brazil is a **predominantly** Catholic nation, an appeal from the Pope could carry weight and potentially influence political decisions in such a context.

"The Vatican offers a unique platform for dialogue" – Sviatoslav Yurash

Ukraine could also benefit from the Vatican's unique geographical and diplomatic position. "The Vatican is surrounded by Italy," noted Owen Matthews, a writer, historian, and Rome-based observer who occasionally covers Vatican affairs.

"Moscow has a better relationship with [Prime Minister] Meloni and Italy than with any other country. That's one positive sign for the Vatican. Another is that Meloni is firmly in favour of supporting Ukraine," Matthews told me.

Throughout Russia's aggression, the Vatican has played a supporting role in humanitarian missions, including efforts to facilitate prisoner exchanges.

"The Vatican offers a unique platform for dialogue," Ukrainian MP Sviatoslav Yurash told me. He is the son of Ukraine's Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador to the Holy See. "The Vatican brings universality, moral authority and structure. The Pope stands for the very values we are fighting for," he added.

Long-standing ties with Russia

The Holy See also has a long-standing relationship with Russia, not least because the country is home to a multi-ethnic Latin-rite

Catholic **population** of nearly 796,000.

Vladimir Putin has personally **visited** the Vatican at least six times as president. He met with Pope John Paul II in 2000 and 2003; Pope Benedict XVI in 2007; and Pope Francis in both 2013 and 2015.

In 2019, Putin visited Pope Francis again, and the two even exchanged gifts: Putin presented an icon of Saints Peter and Paul, along with a DVD of the Russian-Italian film “The Sin”, while the Pope gave him a commemorative medal marking the centenary of the end of World War I.

Pope Francis hoped that long-standing ties might offer some leverage

Therefore, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Pope Francis hoped that these long-standing ties might offer some leverage. In March of that year, he called Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

“We are shepherds of the same Holy People, who believe in God, in the Holy Trinity, in the Blessed Virgin Mary. That is why we must unite in our desire to help bring peace, to support those who suffer, to seek paths toward peace, to stop the fire,” the Pope said at the time.

Official press releases at the time suggested that the two church leaders agreed on the need to promote diplomacy. But as we know, in spring 2022, peace had not materialised.

Unrealistic hopes

The new Pope Leo XIV **hoped** that his papacy could help revive diplomacy, which had stalled at some point, and he offered the Vatican as a platform for ceasefire talks.

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Kremlin has already dismissed that hope.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov **called** the idea that negotiations on Ukraine could take place in the Vatican “unrealistic.”

“Imagine the Vatican as the venue for such talks — it’s a bit inelegant, I would say, for Orthodox countries to discuss the root causes of the conflict on a Catholic platform, especially when one of those causes is the campaign to eliminate the Ukrainian Orthodox Church,” Lavrov claimed.



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The Vatican’s offer to serve as a platform for the negotiations was generous—but some limitations were immediately apparent.

One of the most pressing limitations was practical: for the Kremlin negotiators, travelling to European Union countries is rather complicated. For example, the head of the Russian negotiating team, Vladimir Medinsky, and several others require a special exemption from the EU because they are under sanctions. From this perspective, Turkey is clearly a more convenient location.

Moreover, the Vatican is far from ideal for Russia in terms of freedom of movement and confidentiality, as it is difficult to hold private meetings there, noted Owen Matthews.

Also, “politically, the Kremlin prefers to have a more neutral power, something like the Saudis or a sort of on-again friend like the Turks. These are countries where Russia feels at least not treated as an enemy. That’s this aspect. Pope Leo himself is a significant figure in this

context. He is being more vocal about his support for Ukraine and peace. He is more anti-Russian than Francis ever was... Finally, a more symbolic reason. Because, of course, Istanbul is a shorthand for the deal that was not reached back in April 2022. Istanbul is a good shorthand reminder of the place where diplomacy should continue because it's where diplomacy left off," analysed Matthews.

Kremlin's disinterest

The idea of hosting a meeting between Moscow and Kyiv at the Vatican was originally **proposed** by U.S. President Donald Trump.

While the Ukrainians continue to hope that the new pope might bring fresh momentum to the diplomatic track, the Kremlin appears unmoved by the change, showing little interest in reconsidering its stance.

For Kyiv it is crucial to deepen its diplomatic ties with the new pope

Instead, Moscow remains focused on the arrangements reached in Istanbul — at least for now. The promised prisoner exchange took place just last week, and Russian officials promised to **prepare** a “memorandum”—a document about which nothing is yet known.

For Kyiv, however, it is crucial to deepen its diplomatic ties with the new pope, given his clear stance on Ukraine and the traditional influence the Holy See continues to wield.