Vatican
Vatican News
A bald white man in a suit speaks

Ukrainian Parliamentarian Mykola Stefanchuk speaks to journalists at the Ukrainian Embassy to the Holy See Feb. 21, 2023. A delegation of Ukrainian parliamentarians was in Rome to meet with senior Vatican officials. (CNS photo/Justin McLellan)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js



Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — February 21, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Members of Ukraine's parliament asked for Pope Francis' support in returning the thousands of Ukrainian children believed to be being held in Russian custody.

A group of Ukrainian parliamentarians traveled to Rome the week of Feb. 20 to meet with senior Vatican officials. In addition to asking for Francis to visit the war-torn country, they are requesting the pope's support in returning to Ukraine children they say were abducted by Russian forces.

"We have seen the great impact of the Holy See's help in prisoner exchanges, and so we would like to ask the pope's help on the issue of the deported children," said Yevhen Petruniak, one of the parliamentarians, in a meeting with journalists at the Ukrainian Embassy to the Holy See Feb. 21.

"For Russia, international law does not exist, laws don't work," he said, "so these processes can only be assured through the intervention of highly influential international leaders or influential international organizations," like the pope and the Vatican.

In November 2022, Francis told reporters that the Vatican Secretariat of State had worked behind the scenes to help arrange prisoner exchanges between Ukraine and Russia. In a video message published Feb. 4, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said 1,762 Ukrainians have been returned from Russian captivity since the war began in February 2022.

"Be it a prisoner exchange or the return of children, these are not processes that that are conducted through legislation," Petruniak said.

A study published by the Yale School of Public Health's Humanitarian Research Lab Feb. 14 estimated that at least 6,000 Ukrainian children, aged 4 months to 17 years old, have been held in "re-education" camps in Russia-occupied Crimea and mainland Russia during the past year.

Advertisement

According to Ukraine's Ministry of Reintegration, more than 16,000 children have been deported into Russia as of Feb. 21, many of whom have been adopted by Russian families.

"They are not adopted according to the laws," Mykola Stefanchuk, a Ukrainian parliamentarian, told Catholic News Service. "They live in horrible houses and the main thing is that they live without their families, so we hope that the pope will help

us (get) back our children."

The delegation had requested a meeting with Francis during their visit to Rome to raise the issue with him directly. They met late Feb. 21 with Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, and Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, the Vatican foreign minister. They also had a meeting scheduled with Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity.

"We are convinced that a statement by the Holy Father on the deported children could help them to return" to Ukraine, said Sergii Labaziuk, a member for Ukraine's parliament since 2012. "For Ukrainians, every day is important, so the more each act or clear decision is postponed for us means more victims."

The delegation also expressed its desire for Francis to visit Kyiv. The pope has previously said that he would only travel to Kyiv if he could also travel to Moscow.

Asked about the pope's intention to visit the Russian capital, Parliamentarian Rostyslav Tistyk said it was "incorrect" for Francis to link the trips to Kyiv and Moscow together.