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Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, head of the CEI (Italian Conference of Bishops), welcomes parishioners after celebrating Mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Moscow, on June 29, 2023. Pope Francis' Ukraine peace envoy, Zuppi, went to China on the fourth leg of a mission that had already brought him to Kyiv, Moscow and Washington. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko, file)

Paolo Santalucia

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Vatican City — September 18, 2023
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Russia’s new ambassador to the Vatican met Sept. 18 with Pope Francis for a protocol visit, as signs emerged that the Vatican's Ukraine peace envoy could soon be undertaking a second mission to Moscow.

The Vatican said Ambassador Ivan Soltanovsky was presenting his credentials to Francis, signaling the official start of his term. His motorcade was seen leaving the Russian embassy the morning of Sept. 18, bound for the Vatican, and returning about two hours later.

Soltanovsky replaced Ambassador Alexander Avdeev, whom Francis met with on Feb. 25, 2022 in a remarkable in-person papal visit to the embassy the day after Moscow’s forces invaded Ukraine.

The credential presentation appointment comes after Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in recent days that Moscow was ready to meet again with Francis’ Ukraine peace envoy, Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, a veteran of the Catholic Church's peace initiatives.

"The Vatican is continuing its efforts. The papal envoy will come back (to Russia) soon," Lavrov said Sept. 15 at a roundtable discussion on Ukraine.

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Since Zuppi was appointed in May, he has visited Kyiv, Moscow, Washington and Beijing. Initially his mandate appeared limited to measures to try to reunite Ukrainian children taken to Russia after Moscow’s invasion. But during his meeting

last week in Beijing with Li Hui, China’s special representative for Eurasian affairs, the resumption of stalled grain exports from Ukraine's Black Sea ports was also discussed.

Upon his return to Italy, Zuppi said the Beijing meeting represented an important exchange of ideas and he also voiced optimism at Lavrov’s "positive" opening to a second visit. During his first trip to Moscow in June, Zuppi met with Russia's minister for children's rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, and an adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant in late March for Lvova-Belova and Putin, accusing them of abducting children from Ukraine. Russian officials have denied any forced adoptions, saying some Ukrainian children are in foster care.

Zuppi told the TG2000 broadcaster of the Italian bishops conference this weekend that Lavrov’s openness to a second meeting was "important because peace is made through dialogue and finding the possible and necessary spaces. It’s certainly a positive declaration and goes in the direction hoped for by Pope Francis."

Francis has followed the Holy See’s tradition of neutrality in conflicts by trying to keep open paths of dialogue with both Ukraine and Russia. His stance, and admiration for Russia's imperial past and culture, has at times angered Ukraine, especially its Greek Catholic flock.