News



Pope Leo XIV receives a gift from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a meeting at the Vatican May 18, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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A move to hold talks between Ukraine and Russia at the Vatican appeared to gain momentum May 19, following a call between President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In a post on his social media platform Truth Social, Trump said he believed his two-hour call with Putin "went very well."

He said, "Russia and Ukraine will immediately start negotiations toward a Ceasefire and, more importantly, an END to the War."

Trump said, "Negotiations between Russia and Ukraine will begin immediately." He added, "The Vatican, as represented by the Pope, has stated that it would be very interested in hosting the negotiations."

Trump said he had informed Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as well as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, President Emmanuel Macron of France, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of Italy, Chancellor Friedrich Merz of Germany and President Alexander Stubb of Finland.

"Let the process begin!" said Trump in his post.

In a May 19 post on the X social media platform, Zelenskyy said he had spoken with Trump twice — first one-on-one, and again with von der Leyen, Macron, Meloni, Merz and Stubb — ahead of the call with Putin.

Zelenskyy — who had a private meeting with Pope Leo XIV following the May 18 papal inauguration Mass at St. Peter's Square — said in his conversations with Trump that he had "reiterated that Ukraine is ready for direct negotiations with Russia in any format that brings results. Türkiye, the Vatican, Switzerland — we are considering all possible venues."

In a May 19 statement, Meloni said that "efforts are being made for an immediate start to negotiations between the parties that can lead as soon as possible to a ceasefire and create the conditions for a just and lasting peace in Ukraine.

"In this regard, the willingness of the Holy Father to host the talks in the Vatican was welcomed. Italy is ready to do its part to facilitate contacts and work for peace," Meloni said.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirmed that the Vatican could be a meeting venue for Russia-Ukraine peace talks before meeting May 17 with Cardinal Matteo Zuppi. As the archbishop of Bologna, Italy, Zuppi has served as a papal peace envoy between Ukraine and Russia since 2023.

"I think it's a place that both sides would be comfortable going," Rubio told reporters at the U.S. Embassy in Rome.

Though only days into his papacy, Leo has given war-weary Ukrainians reason to hope that Russia’s armed aggression against their nation — now in its 11th year — can be ended through a just peace. Russia seized Crimea and backed separatist forces in Ukraine's Donbas region in 2014, prior to launching its full scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Leo has frequently referenced Ukraine in his calls for peace, and had a private meeting with Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, father and head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, who like Zelenskyy invited the pope to make an apostolic visit to Ukraine.

Shevchuk also presented the pope with a list of Ukrainian prisoners, seeking the pope's assistance in returning them from Russian detention.

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During his private meeting with Leo, Zelenskyy also asked for help in returning prisoners and thousands of Ukrainian children deported to Russia, where they are submitted to "patriotic reeducation" and adoption by Russian families. He presented the pope with an icon of the Holy Mother with the Infant Child, painted on wood from a munitions crate.

The Vatican has not yet commented on hosting the potential Ukraine-Russia peace negotiations. However, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's Secretary of State, had offered to "eventually make the Vatican ... available for a direct meeting" between Ukraine and Russia after May 16 talks between those nations in Istanbul ended after just two hours, with little result except for a mutual prisoner exchange.

The Istanbul meeting, hosted by Turkey's government with the U.S. urging the two sides to participate, was aimed at securing a 30-day unconditional ceasefire in the three-year full-scale war — something Ukraine has repeatedly called for, although Russia has insisted on demands that British Prime Minister Keir Starmer called "unacceptable."

Despite Trump's posts, Putin appeared to demonstrate less of a sense of urgency about talks, fitting in the call amid a tour of school facilities in Russia's resort city of Sochi.

Putin has continued to demand Ukraine's territorial surrender of five regions — Crimea, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Donetsk and Luhansk, all home to millions of Ukrainians — including substantial territory still under Ukraine's control.

Despite Trump's declarations that Putin is interested in peace, Russia has so far rebuffed the U.S. president's ceasefire proposals. Russian forces have ramped up their attacks on Ukraine, including aerial bombardments of civilians, particularly during recent Christian holy days.

The Vatican already has a history of mediation between Russia and Ukraine. Under Pope Francis, the Vatican helped to mediate prisoner exchanges between the two countries, including one that saw two Ukrainian Catholic priests, Fr. Ivan Levitsky and Fr. Bohdan Geleta, returned to Ukraine in June 2024 following 18 months of Russian captivity and torture.

Russia's war on Ukraine has been described as having both incited and carried out genocidal actions against the Ukrainian people in joint reports from the New Lines Institute and the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights.

The International Criminal Court has so far issued six arrest warrants for Russian officials, including Putin, for war crimes.

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This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.