News



Liudmyla Siryk, left, listens to her grandson, Oleksandr Radchuk, during a press conference on the return of Ukrainian children and civilians taken by Russia during the three-and-a-half-year war, at the Embassy of Ukraine in Italy, in Rome Nov. 19, 2025. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

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Ukraine has asked the Vatican to formalize its role facilitating negotiations over the return of Ukrainian children and other civilians taken by Russia during the nearly four-year war, a Kyiv government official said Wednesday.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made the request in a letter to Pope Leo XIV ahead of an audience Friday, Nov. 21, between the pope and a delegation of returned Ukrainian children and civilians. At a briefing Wednesday, Nov. 19, the young people described being subject to Russian propaganda and their trauma at being separated from loved ones.

Zelenskyy's letter asked that Leo formalize the informal arrangement launched by Pope Francis in which an Italian cardinal, Matteo Zuppi, had served as a personal papal envoy for humanitarian issues.

The deputy head of Zelenskyy's office, Iryna Vereshchuk, told reporters in Rome that Ukraine wanted the Holy See to act as the middleman, or "platform," through which Ukraine and Russia could discuss the return of civilians.

"It's one thing when we have their prisoners of war and Russians are interested in returning them. They have our POW, we have theirs. There is an interest in exchange." But Ukraine isn't holding any Russian civilians to exchange, she said.

It is not clear whether any children or civilians have been returned via the Vatican's informal channel.



Deputy Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine Iryna Vereshchuk speaks to the press at the Embassy of Ukraine in Italy, in Rome Nov. 19, 2025. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

Vereshchuk said under the Zuppi mission, Russia used a "gray zone" to not respond to Ukraine's lists of civilians it wanted released, because the process was not formalized.

"Once the process is formalized we can have proper communications with the Russians and when we submit a letter through the platform they will have to respond," she said.

Neither the Vatican nor the Russian embassy to the Holy See immediately responded to requests for comment.

Warrant for Putin over children abductions

Vereshchuk was accompanying a delegation of Ukrainian children, parents and grandparents who had lived in Russian-controlled or occupied parts of Donetsk or were held by Russian forces elsewhere and now live in Ukrainian-controlled territory.

Ukrainian officials say the country continues to document thousands of cases of children who were unlawfully taken to Russian territory during the war — a practice Kyiv calls one of its most sensitive humanitarian crises.

The International Criminal Court in 2023 issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin for war crimes, accusing him of personal responsibility for the abductions of children from Ukraine.

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According to current data published by Ukraine's Bring Kids Back presidential platform, 19,546 Ukrainian children were officially recorded as deported or forcibly transferred by Russia.

Media reports quoting Ukraine's Human Rights Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets, said that as of March 27, 1,247 children had been successfully returned to Ukraine through diplomatic and humanitarian channels.

Vereshchuk said Ukraine had identified the names of about 2,000 civilians in Russian captivity via the Red Cross. It was not clear whether that number includes children.

Ukrainian youths and Russian propaganda

The young people in the delegation meeting with Leo on Friday described being subject to Russian propaganda while living in Donesk, in eastern Ukraine, where Ukraine has been battling Russian-backed forces since 2014. Russia already controls most of Donbas — its name for Donetsk and neighboring Luhansk — that Moscow illegally annexed along with two southern regions three years ago.

The young people said they were bullied at school by Russian students and teachers and were forced to learn the Russian national anthem, speak Russian and write support letters for Russian soldiers.



Marta Hlazkova, left, and Veronika Vlasova attend a press conference on the return of Ukrainian children and civilians taken by Russia during the three-and-a-half-year war, at the Embassy of Ukraine in Italy, in Rome Nov. 19, 2025. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

"When I said I don't want to write any of these kind of letters, someone argued with me, and I was told that Ukraine doesn't exist" anymore, said Veronika Vlasova, who as a 13-year-old was taken to Russian territory and separated from her mother for 14 months. Vlasova, now 16, said she was held in a children's rehabilitation center in Russian territory without access to her telephone but eventually got out. She now lives in Kyiv.

Liudmyla Siryk described a monthslong search for her grandson, who was injured in Mariupol as a 12-year-old in March 2022, during the opening weeks of the war. The grandson, Oleksandr Radchuk, was separated from his mother, Siryk's daughter, and taken to a hospital in Donetsk.

Siryk said she worked for months to secure the necessary papers to bring Radchuk back to Ukrainian territory, and took a four-day bus ride through Baltic countries and Russia to reach Donetsk, where they were reunited at a hospital.

"I've never been traveling in my life," she said.

Radchuk, now 15, believes his mother is held in Russian captivity.

[Illia Novikov contributed from Kyiv, Ukraine.]