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Putin's July Visit to Pope Could Pave Way for Russia Trip

By Reuters

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Russian President Vladimir Putin will meet Pope Francis next month, the Vatican said on Thursday, an encounter that could help pave the way for an historic papal trip to Russia.

The Vatican said Putin, who will be on a state visit to Italy, will hold talks with the Argentinian-born pope on July 4.

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The meeting, their third since Francis was elected in 2013, comes at a time of improving relations between the Vatican and the world's Orthodox Churches.

It also will be their first since Francis and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill met in 2016, a landmark step in healing the 1,000-year-old rift between the Western and Eastern branches

of Christianity.

Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, and Boris Yeltsin, the first president of post-Soviet Russia, had invited the late Pope John Paul to visit.

But a trip was not possible because of tensions between the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church, the largest and most influential in world Orthodoxy, with 165 million of the world's 250 million Orthodox Christians.

Apart from his meeting three years ago with Kirill, which was the first in history between a Roman Catholic pope and a Russian Orthodox patriarch, Francis has made a number of visits to countries with predominantly Orthodox populations.

The latest were to Romania last week and to Bulgaria and North Macedonia last month.

Ukraine remains a difficult issue in relations between the Vatican and Russia.

At their last meeting in 2015, the pope urged Putin to make a "sincere and great effort" to achieve peace in Ukraine and help bring an end to fighting between Ukrainian government forces and pro-Russian separatist rebels.

Putin has aligned himself closely with the Russian Orthodox Church and has accused the government in Kiev of flagrantly meddling in the life of Orthodoxy in Ukraine, a former Soviet republic where a new national church has broken away from Moscow's orbit.

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