

# Ukrainian president again asks pope to help with citizens' release

In a phone conversation with Pope Francis, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy appealed for help in securing the release of Ukrainian citizens being held in areas occupied by Russian or pro-Russian forces.

The pope reportedly thanked the president for working toward a peaceful settlement of the conflict and "also noted that he was dealing with the issue of the release of Ukrainian serviceman Vitalii Markiv" from an Italian jail, said a statement on the president's official website June 5.

Asked about the phone call, the Vatican press office did not reply as of June 10.

According to a June 5 post on [www.president.gov.ua](http://www.president.gov.ua), the phone call was part of continuing a dialogue that began in early February when President Zelenskiy met the pope and Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, during an official visit to the Vatican.

Zelenskiy had said that during that Feb. 8 meeting, he had asked for the pope's help "to liberate the Ukrainians imprisoned in Donbass, Crimea and Russia."

Russia annexed Crimea in early 2014 and, shortly afterward, Russian-backed separatists began fighting Ukrainian government forces in eastern Ukraine in the area known as Donbass.

More than 13,000 people have been killed since the start of the conflict and more than 1.5 million people have been displaced.

In the phone call June 5, the president said he informed the pope about the security situation in Donbass and "appealed to the Holy See for assistance in the release of all Ukrainians illegally detained in the occupied part of Donbass, in the occupied Crimea and in Russia."

The president also said he and the pope spoke about Sergeant Markiv, a dual Italian-Ukrainian national, who was the commander of a platoon in the Ukrainian National Guard's first battalion.

He was sentenced to 24 years in prison after being found guilty by an Italian court in July 2019 for complicity in the killing of Italian journalist Andrea Rocchelli and his Russian interpreter Andrei Mironov. The two men were killed during a mortar attack in the Donetsk region in May 2014.

The Ukrainian National Guard said the battalion did not have mortars at the time and a Ukrainian-led investigation claimed the two men were killed by

shelling from Russian-led troops.

Ukraine had filed an appeal against the verdict and an Italian appeals court was to have considered the case in the spring before the pandemic hit. A new date has yet to be set.

Zelenskiy had spoken with the pope, Cardinal Parolin and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte about Markiv during his February visit. The pope had reportedly said he would provide help during that meeting.

Other topics during the June 5 phone call included the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the humanitarian challenges facing the world, the president's post said.

The president said he told the pope his support for the "unity, solidarity and openness of Europe is important for Ukraine. It is important to work now to restore mutual trust and strengthen cooperation on the continent."

They discussed cooperation in humanitarian efforts and "agreed to strengthen cooperation in health and environmental protection and to implement joint initiatives in this direction," the president said.