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Putin Visits Italy, Pope as U.S. Seeks More Vatican Criticism

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President Vladimir Putin meets Pope Francis during a private meeting at Vatican City, Jun. 10.

MILAN — Vladimir Putin won lavish praise from Italian Premier Matteo Renzi on Wednesday as a crucial player in international anti-terrorism efforts, as Renzi sought the Russian president's help in ending the conflict in Libya that has fueled the Mediterranean migrant crisis.

Renzi greeted Putin as Russia's "dear" president and didn't voice any criticism against the country's actions in Ukraine, saying simply that they both agreed there must be full implementation of the Minsk peace accord.

Renzi met Putin after a tour of Russia's pavilion at Milan's Expo. Then the Russian president flew to Rome, where he showed up more than an hour late at the Vatican for his meeting with Pope Francis. Putin arrived in a stretch limousine, part of a 13-vehicle motorcade.

The United States, using diplomatic channels, was encouraging the Vatican to use the private papal audience as an occasion to join the West in condemning Moscow's actions in Ukraine.

On Wednesday, the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, Kenneth Hackett, said the U.S. would like to see the Vatican increase its concern about what is happening in Ukraine during the pope's meeting with Putin.

"We think they could say something more about concern of territorial integrity, those types of issues," Hackett told reporters. "It does seem that Russia is supporting the insurgents. And it does seem that there are Russian troops inside Ukraine. This is a very serious situation."

At a brief Russian-Italian news conference in Milan, Putin stressed the price Italian businesses are paying for the economic sanctions lodged by the European Union against Russia, which annexed Crimea from Ukraine during the conflict.

Putin noted how several infrastructure projects won in bidding by Italian companies were stalled because of sanctions against some Russian financial institutions. Likewise, sanctions forced the cancellation of some contracts in the military sphere, costing 1 billion euros ($1.1 billion) in earnings for Italian companies, Putin said.

The leaders of the world's industrialized democracies for a second year in a row refused to let Putin join their G7 summit, which ended earlier this week. They said sanctions against Russia won't be lifted until Moscow fully implements its part of the Ukraine peace accord, and could be increased if needed.

Russia accuses Ukraine of failing to launch political dialogue with the rebellious east and of keeping its economic blockade of areas controlled by pro-Russian rebels. Kiev, the United States, NATO and European leaders have blamed Moscow for supplying rebels with manpower, training and weapons. Russia denies the claims.

Both Putin and Renzi spoke confidently of moving forward after the eventual full implementation of the Minsk peace accords.

Renzi praised Russia for being "in the front row in facing the global threats we are all facing."

Citing Russia's role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, he said Italy "needs Russia's help on the Libyan question." Renzi didn't give specifics on what he hoped Russia might do on Libya.

People smugglers have been flourishing in Libya amid the confusion, violence and chaos that followed the demise of Muammar Gaddafi's dictatorship in 2011. Rival Libyan governments and tribal and militia fighting so far have combined to thwart Italy's calls for reconciliation and pacification in Libya as a way to combat the smuggling.

While the pope has deplored the loss of life in Ukraine and called for all sides to respect the cease-fire, he has not publicly placed any blame on Russia in an apparent bid to not upset Vatican relations with the Orthodox Church and in hopes of engaging Russia's help to confront the persecution of Christians in the Middle East.

After meeting with the pope, Putin was expected to spend time later Wednesday with his old friend, ex-Premier Silvio Berlusconi.

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