

Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with Pope Francis at the Vatican before government talks t

05/07/2019 21:30 by admin

Vladimir Putin touched down in Rome today for lightning talks with Pope Francis and the Italian government about Ukraine and easing anti-Russian sanctions.

The Russian President's bullet-proof limo rolled into the sun-soaked Vatican more than 50 minutes behind schedule as he kicked off a 10-hour diplomatic trip.

Vladimir Putin and Pope Francis stand shoulder to shoulder in the Vatican ahead of their one-on-one meeting

Putin shakes the holyman's hand at the start of his lightning 10-hour visit to Italy

The pair were said to have discussed the Catholic crisis in Ukraine

Putin arrived just one day before Ukraine's religious leaders were due to discuss their country's crisis with the head of the Catholic church.

According to the Kremlin, the purpose of the visit is to discuss "preserving Christian holy sites in Syria" as well as the "rapid abolition of anti-Russian sanctions introduced by the US and the EU".

The hardman's visit will also include talks with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, and his old friend and former leader of Italy Silvio Berlusconi.

This is the third time he has met Pope Francis, amid speculation the visit is a prelude to the first trip by a pope to Russia.

He was also 50 minutes late for his first meeting with Pope Francis in 2013 and more than an hour late for their second encounter in 2015.

RUSSIAN AROUND

Rome's city centre was reportedly on lockdown as meetings took place, with "mobile phones scrambled" and an increased police presence.

Some 50 streets were blocked to traffic as security was tightened.

Putin was driven around in his Russian-made six-metre-long limousine by a chauffeur who has been practising his navigation around the narrow streets ahead of the visit.

After meeting the pope, Putin will see Italian President Sergio Mattarella before holding a joint press conference with

the PM Conte.

After a dinner in his honour, he is due to fly back to Moscow at 10pm.

PUTIN ON A SHOW

Much of Putin's meeting with the Pope in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace is thought to be centred around tensions with Ukraine.

The belligerence between the two countries have impacted Russian and Vatican relations.

When they last met 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.

On Friday, leaders of Ukraine's Catholic Church and Vatican officials begin two days of meetings to discuss various problems in their country, a former Soviet republic.

HOLY WAR

Ukraine's religious world was made tense last year when the country's Orthodox Church, which for centuries effectively had been under control of the Russian Orthodox Church, declared its independence and set up a national Church.

Russia opposes the Ukrainian Orthodox Church having self-governing status, saying the move had more political than religious motives.

Putin 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.

Putin's encounter with the pope on Thursday comes three years after Francis held brief talks with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill in Cuba - 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.

Vlad and Pope Francis stroll around the Vatican

The Russian hardman's armoured black limo was escorted by scores of police

Armed officers peered out of windows during the diplomatic visit

Vlad touched down in Rome to talk religion with Pope Francis and sanctions with the Italian government

The Pope's Gentlemen greet the Russian President upon his arrival at San Damaso courtyard

- The Sun