

Church Mediates Prisoner Exchange of Ukrainian Soldier for Russian Citizens

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Mikhail Sokolov / TASS

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) helped arrange a prisoner exchange of two Russian citizens for a Ukrainian serviceman who had spent nearly two years in captivity, the Kommersant newspaper [reported](#) Thursday.

Taras Kolodiy, one of the last Ukrainian defenders of the Donetsk airport, was released on Sunday Dec. 18. He was exchanged for two Russian citizens accused of aiding separatists. Upon his release, Ukrainian negotiators expressed their thanks to the UOC-MP for its help.

"I want to thank the churches for this release, to which they directly contributed," said Irina Gerashchenko, a Ukrainian presidential representative handling issues related to the Donbass crisis.

Gerashchenko also recalled another case, in which a captive's mother and wife secured his release by writing to the church's rectors.

According to Bishop Kliment, head of the UOC-MP's Synodal Department, the church requested assistance from Russian Orthodox Church leader Patriarch Kirill and the release was planned as a goodwill gesture with nothing given in return. However, Kommersant found that Kolodiy had actually been exchanged for two Russian citizens who were being held in Ukraine.

Vladimir Bezobrazov, the first Russian prisoner, was arrested near Odessa, where he was vacationing in June 2014. Ukrainian authorities accused him of trying to recruit two individuals to fight in the Donbass. After confessing, he was sentenced to five years in prison, although the sentence was later overturned on appeal. In March 2015, he was convicted again, but slated to be released on probation. Rather than being released, however, he was taken to a secret prison in Kharkov operated by Ukraine's Security Service (SBU). Later, he was moved to another such facility in Mariupol.

The second Russian captive was Vladislav Kondalev, a resident of Samara who had volunteered to fight in the self-proclaimed Lugansk People's Republic.

Authorities in Kiev say they plan to release 228 prisoners from a list provided by the officials of the separatist territories. However, according to Irina Gerashchenko, almost 200 of them cannot be positively identified. Many of the names are repeated, she says, or they are individuals convicted of serious crimes and not eligible for amnesty.

In return for these amnesties, Ukraine expects the release of 58 of its own prisoners.

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