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# Vigilantes Plot Rescue Mission to Save Russian Captive From Syria

By Allison Quinn

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A shot of Konstantin Zhuravlyov from footage released by his captors.

In the wake of U.S. media reports on Sunday that the Islamic State militant group has claimed their first Russian victim in Syria, a campaign to rescue another Russian who has been held there by al-Qaida-affiliated extremists for a year has kicked into overdrive.

Two separate campaigns are under way to save 33-year-old Konstantin Zhuravlyov, a Siberian traveler and photographer who was snatched up by members of the al-Tawhid Brigade last October after crossing the Turkish border into conflict-riddled Syria. Zhuravlyov — currently the only known Russian captive still in Syria — has appeared in a series of videos since that time, appealing to the Russian government to help secure his release in the most recent video, uploaded to YouTube in April.

"We've turned to the Foreign Ministry, to the embassy in Damascus, to the president. They are carrying out work [to save Konstantin], but we don't know the details because they can't

inform us of these things or they'd be putting him in danger," the captive's mother, Nadezhda Zhuravlyova, told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

"We don't even know where exactly he's located right now. We just know it's not far from the border with Turkey," she said.

The Foreign Ministry issued a statement in late August saying that they were working to free Zhuravlyov, but that they could say nothing more about the situation for fear of compromising his safety.

Fearing for Zhuravlyov's safety, family friend and well-known Siberian adventurer Yevgeny Kovalevsky has positioned himself front and center, having offered to travel to Syria as part of a rescue operation.

First, however, Kovalevsky is set to meet with the Syrian ambassador in Moscow to discuss what can be done on the ground in Syria to assist in freeing Zhuravlyov.

"There is a possibility for a prisoner exchange. ... There are rumors that the group holding him is ready for an exchange — these are just rumors, but still," Kovalevsky said, noting that he had met with the Syrian ambassador previously to discuss the matter.

"I want to meet with him again because word is — and again, these are just rumors — word is that Konstantin was transferred from al-Tawhid to the Islamic Front. And I want to find out if they have different conditions for his release, if an exchange is possible," Kovalevsky said.

Kovalevsky claimed that discussions have already been held about Zhuravlyov's release at the highest level, with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and President Vladimir Putin having met with State Duma Deputy Yelena Ushakova and several representatives of the Foreign Ministry earlier this month. Ushakova represents Zhuravlyov's native Tomsk region in the Duma.

Meanwhile, grassroots organization Alternative, which focuses on helping victims of trafficking and labor exploitation, has renewed its own campaign to save Zhuravlyov after having previously conducted several rounds of negotiations with members of al-Tawhid.

Throughout the spring, Oleg Melnikov, head of Alternative's Moscow branch, said he was involved in negotiations with a commander of al-Tawhid in Syria.

In mid-April, Melnikov said his negotiations had yielded a result: Zhuravlyov's captors demanded that the Syrian government release three of the rebels' wives from prison in exchange for Zhuravlyov's release.

The agreement, corroborated by Zhuravlyov's mother, was the first glimmer of hope for Zhuravlyov and his family, though it fell apart when the commander whom Melnikov had been in touch with was killed that same month in an airstrike, Melnikov said.

On Wednesday, the group sent one of its volunteers, Artemy Rostov, to Turkey to try again, as al-Tawhid has since undergone drastic changes in its leadership after merging with the Islamic Front.

Having formed in late November to fight the forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad,

the Islamic Front is a relatively new force in a civil war that has been raging since early 2011. The umbrella group consists of seven separate military factions, including al-Tawhid, with an estimated 45,000 members.

Rostov was set to meet with representatives of the Islamic Front in Turkey to discuss Zhuravlyov's condition and possible negotiations for his release.

Claiming to have contacts among the militants holding Zhuravlyov, another member of Alternative said Thursday that the group had credible information that Zhuravlyov was still alive and well.

"We've been told by people on the ground [that he's still alive]. There's no point in killing him. They want an exchange instead," said Zakir Ismailov, the coordinator for Alternative in Dagestan.

"Within 10-15 days there should be results from our negotiations," Ismailov said.

"The situation there is extremely complicated. The Islamic State is attacking on all fronts, and the group holding [Zhuravlyov] is not on good terms with IS," Ismailov said.

Melnikov said in a message on Facebook that information on Zhuravlyov had come from someone from the Islamic Front "who has been with him for the past six months."

A meeting with a Syrian opposition politician was scheduled in the next few days to discuss what the Syrian opposition could offer al-Tawhid to have Zhuravlyov freed, he said, without offering further details on the location of the meeting.

Zhuravlyov's mother said the most important thing was to secure written demands from Zhuravlyov's captors, because only then could the negotiations begin at the government level.

"Once they do that, once they write up their demands, then we can do something," she said.

She said the last time she spoke directly to her son was in February, when he was allowed to call her via Skype. At that time, she said, her son said his captors would soon kill him if the Russian government didn't intervene. He also said he was being treated well, she said, but "he was clearly monitored [by guards] during the phone call."

Zhuravlyova said she could not be certain beyond a reasonable doubt that her son was still alive, as the last time she'd spoken to him was in the spring. But she has received information through people on the ground in Syria that he is still alive and well.

"I know there is a person [on the ground there] taking part in negotiations. But I have never seen this person, I am just told about him from others involved in the process. ... This person hasn't even seen Kostya himself, not once; that's what we are told. So we have no trustworthy information on Konstantin's condition," she said.

"We can't be sure that this information that he is alive is true, but we believe it. We believe it because ... because we have to," she said, her voice breaking. "We have to keep hoping."

She conceded that the ongoing attempts to rescue her son may very well not work out, and that the situation on the ground in Syria is beyond anyone's control at this point.

But the willingness and eagerness with which people like Kovalevsky and Rostov have come forward to help provides some comfort, she said.

"So many people have been kind — not just Russian people, people from all over the world. There are so many people hoping for the best for Kostya — hundreds upon hundreds of people," she said.

In his most recent video, Zhuravlyov explained that he was motivated to travel through Syria as part of a larger expedition partly because he was moved by the country's strife.

"When I saw these news reports about Syria, about what was happening here, I wanted to take on that pain, the pain people experience during war," he said, adding that he never expected to end up a hostage.

"I'm not a thief, I'm not a killer, I'm not a soldier. But I've been held here for six months. I'd like my freedom back now," he said.

The Russian Embassy in Damascus declined to comment on the matter on Thursday.

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