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Ukrainian Military Pilot Savchenko 'Flying Home'

May 25, 2016



Former Ukrainian army pilot Nadezhda Savchenko

Former Ukrainian pilot Nadiya Savchenko is now on a plane bound for Kiev, the Reuters news agency reported early Wednesday afternoon.

Her release is part of a long awaited prisoner exchange between Savchenko and Russian soldiers Alexander Alexandrov and Yevgeny Yerofeyev.

A second plane carrying the men is also believed to have landed in Moscow's Vnukovo airport, the RBC news website reported.

A plane sent by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko arrived in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don earlier today to collect Savchenko, an unnamed source told Reuters. The 35-year-old had been sentenced to 22 years in jail by a court in the city after being found guilty of involvement in the deaths of two Russian journalists.

Alexandrov and Yerofeyev, found guilty of fighting on Ukrainian territory as Russian military

personnel, were pardoned by the Ukrainian president on Wednesday morning, Reuters reported.

The petition for pardon was not filed personally by the soldiers, as under Ukrainian law this would constitute an admission of guilt, Alexandrov's lawyer Valentin Rybin told the TASS agency.

Alexandrov and Yerofeyev have maintained their innocence since the trial, telling the court that they were part of an unofficial Lugansk militia paramilitary squad. Both men initially admitted to being a Russian serviceman while under questioning by Ukrainian authorities and journalists, but later retracted the statement.

The Russian Defense Ministry maintains that Alexandrov and Yerofeyev were not sent to Ukraine in an official capacity but had acted as a private parties.

Changes to Ukraine's pardon procedure were signed into force by President Petro Poroshenko on May 14. The new laws allow lawyers and family members to apply for a pardon on a prisoner's behalf.

For Ukraine to pardon the men without requiring them to admit their guilt would be a compromise, the gazeta.ru news website wrote Wednesday.

Nadiya Savchenko has not applied for a pardon. Legally, she would be extradited to Ukraine to serve her sentence back home.

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