The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Retired U.S. Marine Held in Russia for Spying Is Innocent, Family Says

By Reuters

January 02, 2019



Whelan family

A retired U.S. Marine detained by Russia on spying charges was visiting Moscow for a wedding and is innocent, his family said on Tuesday.

Paul Whelan had been staying with a wedding party for a fellow former Marine at the Metropol hotel in Moscow, said his brother David Whelan, who learned of the arrest on Monday.

"His innocence is undoubted and we trust that his rights will be respected," Whelan's family said in a statement released on Twitter on Tuesday.

Russia's FSB state security service said the American had been detained on Friday, but it gave no details of the nature of his alleged espionage activities. Under Russian law, espionage can carry a prison sentence of between 10 and 20 years.

Related article: Russia Detains American in Moscow Over Suspected Spying

A U.S. State Department representative said Russia had notified it that a U.S. citizen had been detained and it expected Moscow to provide consular access to see him.

"Russia's obligations under the Vienna Convention require them to provide consular access. We have requested this access and expect Russian authorities to provide it," the representative said, without providing details of the identity of the American or the reasons behind his detention.

Butina case

Daniel Hoffman, a former CIA Moscow station chief, said it is "possible, even likely" that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered Whelan's arrest to set up an exchange for Maria Butina, the Russian citizen who pleaded guilty on Dec. 13 to acting as an agent tasked with influencing U.S. conservative groups.

Putin's aim was "to make us feel some pain and his family to feel some pain. That's their (Moscow's) pressure point," Hoffman told Reuters.

"Putin knows there will be a lot of public square pressure to get this guy out," he said.

Related article: Moscow Accuses U.S. of Forcing False Confession From Alleged Russian Agent Maria Butina

Putin told U.S. President Donald Trump in a letter on Sunday that Moscow was ready for dialogue on a "wide-ranging agenda," the Kremlin said following a series of failed attempts to hold a new summit.

At the end of November, Trump abruptly cancelled a planned meeting with Putin on the sidelines of a G20 summit in Argentina, citing tensions about Russian forces opening fire on Ukrainian navy boats and then seizing them.

Trump's relations with Putin have been under a microscope as a result of U.S. Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. election and possible collusion with the Trump campaign.

Moscow has denied intervening in the election and Trump has branded Mueller's probe as a witch hunt.

Russia's relations with the United States plummeted when Moscow annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in 2014, and Washington and Western allies have imposed a broad range of sanctions on Russian officials, companies and banks.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/01/02/retired-us-marine-held-in-russia-for-spying-is-innocent-family-says-a64021