

Outgoing U.S. Envoy in Russia Calls for Paul Whelan's Release

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Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency

Outgoing U.S. Ambassador in Moscow Jon Huntsman has urged the Russian government to release Paul Whelan, an American detained in Russia on suspicion of espionage.

Whelan, 49, who Russian authorities say was detained while receiving classified information late in December 2018, faces up to 20 years in prison if found guilty of spying. He denies the allegations and [believes](#) he was set up in a politically motivated sting.

Related article: [Ex-Marine Whelan Links His Detention in Russia to U.S. Sanctions](#)

Russia should “immediately release” Whelan because of his “deteriorating health” and a “lack of any evidence” in his case, Huntsman told reporters outside Lefortovo prison in comments [published](#) by RFE/RL’s Russian-language service Wednesday.

Whelan, who holds U.S., British, Canadian and Irish passports, was detained by FSB agents in

a Moscow hotel room on Dec. 28 after a Russian acquaintance gave him a flash drive. His lawyer said Whelan thought the flash drive contained holiday photos, but Federal Security Service agents say it actually held classified information.

Huntsman questioned the FSB's version of events, saying "somebody would have seen something, certainly his lawyers would have seen something by now" if Whelan was caught red-handed.

The outgoing envoy also contrasted Whelan's inability to communicate with his family: "The treatment that is accorded him here certainly is not equal to the treatment that is accorded to Russian prisoners in the United States."

A Moscow court ordered Whelan to be held in pre-trial custody until Oct. 29.

Thursday marks Huntsman's last day in Moscow as he is reportedly [considering](#) a run for governor in his home state of Utah.

During Huntsman's tenure, Russia and the U.S. clashed over a number of issues, including Russia's alleged [interference](#) in the 2016 presidential election and its arrests of [Whelan](#) and U.S. citizen [Michael Calvey](#).

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