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Russia Revisits U.S. Prisoner Swap After Whelan Sentencing

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Lyubov Yaroshenko, the mother of Russian pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko, holds a photograph of her son during a press conference in April 2016. **Artyom Geodakyan / TASS**

Russia could send Paul Whelan home to the United States as part of an exchange with Russian prisoners held in the U.S., officials and lawyers said after Whelan's sentencing Monday.

Whelan, a former Marine who also holds British, Canadian and Irish passports, was sentenced to 16 years in a penal colony for espionage in a trial he dismissed as a "sham." Russia last year proposed a prisoner swap involving pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko, who is serving 20 years in the U.S. for conspiracy to smuggle cocaine into the country.

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Whelan's lawyer Vladimir Zherebenkov said the guilty verdict was expected because "no one was hiding" alleged plans to swap him for Russian prisoners in the U.S. since his arrest in late 2018.

Whelan received a harsh sentence Monday in reprisal for the jailing of Yaroshenko and convicted Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout, who is serving 25 years in the U.S., Zherebenkov was cited by Interfax as saying.

“I also heard proposals on the sidelines of conducting an exchange instead of appealing [Whelan's verdict],” the lawyer said. “Whether it’ll be an exchange only for Bout or for Yaroshenko too, I don’t know.”

Zherebenkov declined to disclose further details, saying “I’m not allowed to say certain things.”

A senior Russian diplomat has also brought up Moscow’s past proposals to exchange Whelan and Russian nationals serving what Russia views as long jail sentences in the U.S.

“We’re sticking with the previous position and these options have been repeatedly offered to the Americans,” Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told the state-run RIA Novosti news agency.

The Kremlin declined to comment on Whelan’s possible exchange for Bout or Yaroshenko, saying “we don’t deal with these issues.” Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov also bristled at Whelan’s characterization as a pawn in a potential U.S.-Russian exchange.

Whelan’s twin brother David said in a statement that the family hopes a conviction would allow Russia and the U.S. to "begin discussing Paul's release immediately."

AFP contributed reporting to this article.

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