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Russia in Talks With U.S. to Swap Paul Whelan – Reuters

February 16, 2021



A Russian court convicted Whelan, 57, of espionage and sentenced him to 16 years in prison last June.
Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency

Updated at 10:15 a.m. on Feb. 17 to add a statement from David Whelan.

Russia is in talks with the United States on a prisoner swap involving Paul Whelan, a former U.S. Marine that Moscow jailed for spying, Reuters cited his Russian lawyer as saying Tuesday in a statement that Whelan's brother denied.

Whelan's attorneys previously suggested that prisoner exchange talks had stalled over the 2020 U.S. elections and the Trump administration's reluctance to release a Russian citizen amid claims of interference in the vote.

Related article: U.S. Ex-Marine Whelan Will Not Appeal Russian Espionage Verdict: Agencies

Russian security services say that Washington "specifically under [U.S. President Joe] Biden"

has initiated talks to exchange Whelan, Reuters quoted Whelan's lawyer Vladimir Zherebenkov as saying.

Zherebenkov named high-profile arms dealer Viktor Bout and convicted pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko, as well as unnamed entrepreneurs and "computer programmers," as potential Russian candidates for the swap.

The Kremlin said Tuesday it does "not yet have information" on the possible prisoner swap.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov later denied that prisoner exchange talks involving Whelan specifically were underway, noting that Moscow is ready to discuss other convicted persons with Washington.

In an emailed statement Tuesday, Whelan's brother David called Zherebenkov's statement "uncorroborated."

"Mr. Zherebenkov may have an inside line to FSB counterparts who entrapped Paul to extract concessions (or whoever in the Russian Federation government would be involved in such a discussion). ... Or Mr. Zherebenkov may be speaking without any context at all. Either way, there doesn't seem to be any credible activity by anyone official that will lead to Paul's release," he wrote.

A Russian court convicted Whelan, 50, of espionage and sentenced him to 16 years in prison last June. Whelan, who also holds Canadian, British and Irish passports, has denied the charges and Washington has condemned his imprisonment.

Russia's Foreign Ministry last month called reports of a possible prisoner swap a "pressure" campaign to secure "unilateral concessions" from Moscow.

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