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Russia Arrests WSJ Journalist on Spying Allegations

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WSJ reporter Evan Gershkovich leaves a court building in Moscow. **Evgenia Novozhenina / Reuters**

Updated with details of arrest.

Russia on Thursday arrested Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich on espionage charges in a major escalation of the Kremlin's wartime crackdown on independent journalism.

After being detained in the Ural Mountains city of Yekaterinburg, Gershkovich was formally arrested by a Moscow court in a hearing held behind closed doors.

Russia's State Security Service (FSB) alleged that Gershkovich, a U.S. citizen, was involved in the collection of "secret information" about a Russian defense company, state-run news agency RIA Novosti reported.

The allegations of spying against Gershkovich — the first against a foreign journalist since

the end of the Cold War — look set to send a fresh chill through Russia's already devastated media space and could lead to other foreign media outlets pulling journalists out of the country.

"It is a frontal attack on all foreign correspondents who still work in Russia. And it means that the FSB is off the leash," investigative journalist Andrei Soldatov, an expert on the Russian security services wrote on Twitter.

Gershkovich, 31, was taken to and from the court with a hood over his head and his hands handcuffed behind his back, independent media outlet Mediazona reported, citing a journalist in the court building.

Gershkovich denied his guilt in court, state-run news agency TASS reported.

"The Wall Street Journal vehemently denies the allegations from the FSB and seeks the immediate release of our trusted and dedicated reporter, Evan Gershkovich," the WSJ said in a statement.

"We stand in solidarity with Evan and his family."

According to RIA Novosti, the FSB alleged that Gershkovich was working for the U.S. government and was detained while trying to obtain secret information.

Under Russian law, those convicted of espionage can be jailed for up to 20 years.

"What that employee of The Wall Street Journal was doing in Yekaterinburg does not have any relation to journalism," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a statement.

Dmitry Peskov, a spokesperson for Russian President Vladimir Putin, told reporters that Gershkovich was caught "red-handed."

Gershkovich was reportedly in Yekaterinburg to cover local reaction to the war in Ukraine and Russia's Wagner mercenary group.

Local PR expert Yaroslav Shirshikov said Thursday that he had assisted Gershkovich with reporting from the city and that he received an overnight phone call from a WSJ employee unable to contact Gershkovich.

According to Shirshikov, Gershkovich visited Yekaterinburg several weeks ago, but recently returned to the city.

Embed:

> At Lefortovo Court in Moscow, the FSB is demanding WSJ journalist Evan Gershkovich be put under arrest on charges of espionage. Meanwhile, a special police unit came inside the building, demanding reporters leave the floor where hearings are to take place.

> Video: Mediazona pic.twitter.com/fjPVrJ4kx4
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> — Mediazona (@mediazona_en) March 30, 2023

"We talked with him [Gershkovich] about the socio-political life of the city," Shirshikov told The Moscow Times when asked about his meeting earlier this month with Gershkovich, adding that the reporter appeared "very pleased with his trip."

Shirshikov said earlier that Gershkovich was likely detained Wednesday afternoon, highlighting a local media report that security officers entered the city's Bukowski Grill restaurant and took an unidentified man with a sweater pulled over his head into a minibus.

The Bukowski Grill restaurant in Yekaterinburg declined a request for a comment from The Moscow Times on Thursday.

Veteran Yekaterinburg-based journalist Dmitry Kolezev, who lives abroad and was one of the first to report on Gershkovich's arrest, said he believed Gershkovich was detained for his reporting.

"I assume the reason was Evan's journalistic work," Kolezev told The Moscow Times.

A source among Western journalists working in Moscow told independent Russian news outlet Meduza on Thursday that Gershkovich had recently visited the nearby city of Nizhny Tagil, which is the location of a major tank factory.

Another Western journalist in Russia, who wished to remain anonymous, confirmed this to The Moscow Times.

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While most independent journalists operating in Russia fled the country last year after the passage of draconian wartime censorship laws, many foreign reporters have continued to work inside the country.

Reporters Without Borders said Thursday that the organization was "alarmed" by the incident involving Gershkovich.

"The detention of Evan Gershkovich is a very bad signal for the work of any media organization in Russia," Russian political expert Alexander Kynev said on Telegram.

Independent Russian journalist Pavel Kanygin, an acquaintance of Gershkovich, speculated that the Kremlin may seek to exchange Gershkovich in a prisoner swap with the United States.

Last year, Washington released notorious Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout, who was serving a prison sentence in the U.S., in exchange for American basketball star Brittney Griner who was convicted on drug charges in Russia.

The WSJ did not immediately respond to a request for comment from The Moscow Times.

Gershkovich previously worked at French news agency Agence France-Presse, The Moscow Times and The New York Times.

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