The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

U.S. Explores 'Narrow' Sanctions Relief to Free Gershkovich, Whelan From Russia – Reports

May 12, 2023

Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, left, and former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan. **Sergei Kiselev, Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

The United States is considering easing sanctions against Moscow in order to secure the release of jailed Americans Evan Gershkovich and Paul Whelan from Russian prison, CNN reported Thursday, citing unnamed senior White House officials.

The U.S. has classified Gershkovich, a Wall Street Journal reporter, and Whelan, a former U.S. Marine, as "wrongfully detained."

The "narrow sanctions relief" on Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) is reportedly part of the Biden administration's efforts to come up with "creative offers" that could "gin up" Russian interest in a prisoner swap.

Administration officials said last month's sanctions against the FSB could be rolled back if

Americans held in Russia were released.

However, "the Russians are so widely sanctioned already, so sanctions relief is unlikely to move [them]," a former U.S. official was quoted as saying.

As a result, Washington's priority is to identify Russian spies detained by U.S. allies because the U.S. does not currently have high-level Russian spies in custody, according to CNN.

Related article: Russian Court Rejects Gershkovich Arrest Appeal

Moscow is "most interested" in the extradition of Vadim Krasikov, a former FSB) colonel jailed in Germany for the assassination of a Georgian national in 2019, CNN cited an unnamed source familiar with discussions as saying.

U.S. officials made "quiet inquiries" with Berlin over Krasikov's possible inclusion in a prisoner swap, the broadcaster reported, citing a senior German government source.

Russia is refusing to swap Gershkovich and Whelan for multiple Russian cybercriminals in U.S. custody, according to CNN's sources among current and former U.S. officials.

Moscow expects to exchange Whelan for a Russian intelligence-linked prisoner, current and former U.S. officials were cited as saying.

U.S. officials anticipate similar Russian demands for Gershkovich.

Gershkovich is currently awaiting trial on charges of espionage that he and The Wall Street Journal categorically deny. Whelan is serving a 16-year prison sentence on the same charges, which he also denies.

"Russia treats espionage as a different crime, as something much more serious than anything else," CNN quoted a former senior administration official as saying.

"They have made clear that they expect something more significant in return. They want a like for a like."

Some of the U.S. efforts to "think outside the box" on a potential prisoner swap predate Gershkovich's detention in late March, CNN reported.

The Kremlin declined to comment Friday on the possible exchange.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/05/12/us-explores-narrow-sanctions-relief-to-free-gershkovich-whelan-from-russia-reports-a81110