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U.S. Journalist Working for Radio Free Europe Detained in Russia

By AFP

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Alsu Kurmasheva. **Radio Liberty**

A Russian-American journalist working for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has been detained in Russia and charged with failing to register as a foreign agent, her employer and a journalist watchdog group said Wednesday.

Alsu Kurmasheva, an editor with the U.S. Congress-funded outlet's Tatar-Bashkir service, "needs to be released so she can return to her family immediately," RFE/RL acting president Jeffrey Gedmin said in a statement.

"Alsu is a highly respected colleague, devoted wife and dedicated mother to two children," Gedmin said.

She is the second U.S. journalist to be held by Russia in recent months. Evan Gershkovich, a reporter for The Wall Street Journal, has been detained since March, accused of spying.

Kurmasheva was being held at a temporary detention center as of Wednesday evening, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said in a statement, citing state media Tatar-Inform.

A representative of Russian human-rights news website OVD-Info told CPJ that Kurmasheva would "most likely" be transferred to pre-trial detention shortly.

Kurmasheva lives in Prague, Czech Republic, but entered Russia on May 20 for a family emergency, the CPJ said.

She was temporarily detained at the Kazan airport on June 2 before her return flight, where both her U.S. and Russian passports were confiscated and she was fined for failing to register her American passport with Russian authorities, according to RFE/RFL.

Citing Tatar-Inform, the CPJ said Kurmasheva is accused of having "deliberately conducted a targeted collection of military information about Russian activities via the Internet in order to transmit information to foreign sources" last year, and providing international authorities with "alternative analytical materials" as part of "information campaigns discrediting Russia."

Kurmasheva has covered ethnic minorities in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, RFE/RFL, said, especially on efforts to preserve the Tatar language, even as Russian authorities "have exerted increased pressure on Tatars in recent years."

She was awaiting the return of her passports when the new charges were announced Wednesday, the CPJ said, adding that if found guilty she faces up to five years in jail.

The organization said it was "deeply concerned" by the charges.

Russian authorities must "release her immediately and drop all charges against her," Gulnoza Said, CPJ's Europe and Central Asia program coordinator, said.

"Journalism is not a crime and Kurmasheva's detention is yet more proof that Russia is determined to stifle independent reporting."

Gershkovich's arrest

"Alsu was detained simply because she is an employee of Radio Liberty. In fact, now any independent journalist in Russia risks the same thing," CPJ cited a colleague of Kurmasheva's as saying, on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal.

According to the CPJ, seven RFE/RL journalists had their homes searched by Tatarstan police last year.

Kurmasheva's arrest comes seven months after the detention of Gershkovich, who became the first Western reporter to be jailed on spy charges in Russia since the Soviet era.

Gershkovich, The Wall Street Journal and the U.S. government have rejected the spying allegations.

Russia has not provided public evidence of the allegations it has made against Gershkovich.

A Moscow court earlier this month rejected his appeal of his detention, and ordered him held until the end of November.

The American, who previously worked for AFP, continued to report from Russia after the Kremlin launched its Ukraine offensive, despite many Western journalists leaving the country.

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