The Moscow Times
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U.S. Says Russia Rejected 'Substantial' Proposal to Free 2 Americans

By AFP

December 05, 2023



Evan Gershkovich (L) and Paul Whelan. **Sergei Kiselev, Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

The United States said Tuesday that Russia rejected a new proposal to free two detained Americans, Wall Street Journal correspondent Evan Gershkovich and former Marine Paul Whelan.

"We have made a number of proposals, including a substantial one in recent weeks," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters.

"That proposal was rejected by Russia," he said.

Miller said that Secretary of State Antony Blinken and President Joe Biden would keep trying to find a way to free the pair, considered "wrongfully detained" by the State Department.

"They never should have been arrested in the first place. They should both be released immediately," Miller said.

"There is no prior higher priority for the secretary of state. There is no higher priority for the president."

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He declined to give further details on the proposal, including whether Russians could be released.

The United States, despite a sharp deterioration of ties since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has arranged two prisoner swaps — including one that freed basketball star Brittney Griner, who was detained over traces of cannabis.

Gershkovich, 32, was arrested during a reporting trip at the end of March in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg, becoming the first Western reporter to be jailed on spying charges in Russia since the Soviet era.

The reporter, his newspaper and the U.S. government all strongly deny he was involved in espionage.

A Moscow court last week extended his detention until January.

Whelan worked in security for a U.S. vehicle parts company when he was arrested in Moscow in 2018 and has always asserted that the evidence against him was falsified.

His family said last week that Whelan was assaulted in prison by a fellow inmate, potentially because of his nationality.

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