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Putin ‘Hopes’ Moscow, Washington Will Find Solution on Arrested U.S. Citizens

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Russian President Vladimir Putin said Thursday that Moscow was in “difficult” talks with Washington about a prisoner swap involving WSJ reporter Evan Gershkovich and jailed ex-Marine Paul Whelan.

“There are contacts on this issue and dialogue is ongoing, but it's not straightforward,” Putin said.

“I hope that we will find a solution. But, I repeat, the American side must hear us and make an appropriate decision. One that suits the Russian side as well,” Putin said, responding to New York Times journalist Valerie Hopkins.

Putin disputed Hopkins' characterization of Gershkovich’s detention “without trial and investigation,” and poses a question of his own: “Why don’t they [Western journalists] stop committing offenses on Russian territory?”

Related article: Russia Upholds Detention of WSJ Reporter Gershkovich – Court

The U.S. State Department responded by saying Russia so far has refused all U.S. offers for the release of Gershkovich and Whelan and calling on Putin to negotiate in good faith.

"There is one significant offer that we made as recently as a few weeks ago," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters, adding that offers had been "rejected every time" by Russia.

Miller said the United States "would welcome them negotiating in good faith. We would welcome them engaging seriously with us."

On Thursday, a Moscow court upheld a ruling to hold Gershkovich, arrested in Russia earlier this year on espionage charges, in detention until Jan. 30.

The 32-year-old Wall Street Journal correspondent in Moscow, his employer and the U.S. government have all rejected the spying allegations.

Whelan was accused of spying after agents from Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) detained him in a Moscow hotel room on in December 2018.

He was sentenced to 16 years in prison on espionage charges in 2020, and the U.S. has designated him “wrongfully detained.”

AFP contributed reporting.

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