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From Whelan to Karelina: The Americans Held in Russian Prisons

By Leyla Latypova

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Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) announced Tuesday that a dual U.S.-Russian citizen was arrested in the city of Yekaterinburg on charges of "financially assisting a foreign state in activities directed against [Russian] security."

The detainee was later identified by news agencies as 33-year-old Ksenia Karelina, a native of Yekaterinburg who obtained U.S. citizenship in 2021 and lives in Los Angeles.

Karelina is now one of several U.S. citizens currently held in the Russian prison system, most of whom are waiting to be released via a prisoner swap.

Moscow has been accused of targeting U.S. citizens to use as leverage to secure the release of its own nationals held by Washington.

Here is more about them:

Paul Whelan

Former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan worked in security for a U.S. vehicle parts company when he was detained on spying allegations in a Moscow hotel room in 2018.

In 2020, the ex-Marine was sentenced to 16 years in prison on espionage charges, though he maintains that the evidence against him was falsified.

Whelan, 53, is currently serving his sentence in a maximum-security penal colony in the republic of Mordovia in Russia's Volga region. The ex-Marine has complained of being physically assaulted by prison staff and a fellow inmate.

Whelan, who also holds U.K., Irish and Canadian passports, said last year that he feels "abandoned" by Washington after being left out of recent prisoner swaps.

"With each case, my case is going to the back of the line. They've kind of just left me in the dust. And at this point, this juncture, it's very concerning," Whelan told the BBC.

Marc Fogel

Marc Fogel, a former U.S. teacher and diplomat, was detained in August 2021 while passing through customs at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport. Russian customs officers claimed to have found 11 grams of marijuana and eight grams of hash oil in his luggage.

In June 2022, a Moscow court sentenced Fogel to 14 years in a maximum-security prison on charges of large-scale drug acquisition, manufacture, smuggling and possession.

Fogel, 62, pleaded guilty to some of the charges but denied intent.

Related article: Marc Fogel, My American Teacher, Is the Kremlin's Political Pawn

Fogel, who suffers from chronic back pain, maintained that the marijuana was prescribed to him by a U.S. doctor after a spinal surgery and that he was unaware of Russia's ban on medicinal cannabis.

The teacher's family has repeatedly called on the U.S. State Department to classify him as "wrongfully detained." a designation they believe could increase the chances for the release of Fogel, whose case has been likened to that of U.S. basketball star Brittney Griner.

Evan Gershkovich

Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, 32, was arrested during a reporting trip to Yekaterinburg in March 2023.

Russian officials claim that Gershkovich, an accredited Moscow-based reporter, tried to obtain classified defense information for the U.S. government. However, no evidence of these allegations has been made public in nearly a year since his arrest.

The Wall Street Journal, U.S. officials and Gershkovich himself have all rejected the espionage

allegations.

Related article: Russia's Arrest of Evan Gershkovich Echoes Soviet Spy Scandal

Earlier this month, President Vladimir Putin told former Fox News star Tucker Carlson that he would like to see Gershkovich released as part of a prisoner exchange between Russia and the United States and that talks between the two countries were ongoing.

Putin suggested that he wanted to see Vadim Krasikov, a suspected FSB agent jailed in Germany for assassinating a Chechen dissident, swapped for Gershkovich.

Gershkovich, a former reporter for The Moscow Times, is currently held in detention at Moscow's notorious Lefortovo Prison. If convicted, he could spend up to 20 years in prison.

Alsu Kurmasheva

Kurmasheva, a journalist for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), was arrested in October 2023 for failing to register as a "foreign agent" and later hit with additional criminal charges over alleged violation of Russia's wartime censorship laws.

Kurmasheva, a dual Russian-U.S. citizen who resided in the Czech Republic with her husband and two children, was detained in Kazan, the capital of the republic of Tatarstan, when visiting her elderly mother.

The journalist's employer, family and lawyers have denied all charges against Kurmasheva.

"Russian authorities are conducting a deplorable criminal campaign against the wrongfully detained Alsu Kurmasheva," RFE/RL President Stephen Capus said in February after a Russian court ruled to extend the journalist's detention.

Capus added that Kurmasheva had been "imprisoned and treated unjustly simply because she is an American journalist."

Kurmasheva's employer and family have repeatedly called on the U.S. government to declare her "wrongfully detained."

If convicted, Kurmasheva could face up to 15 years in prison.

Robert Romanov Woodland

Woodland, a dual U.S.-Russian citizen who worked as an English teacher in Moscow, was arrested in January and accused of the "illegal acquisition, storage, transportation, manufacture and processing" of drugs.

He would face 10-20 years in prison if convicted.

According to Interfax, police caught Woodland purchasing 4.5 grams of an unidentified drug with the intent of selling it later. He was reportedly found in possession of the synthetic narcotic mephedrone.

Woodland, 32, was born in the Russian city of Perm but adopted by an American family at age 2, he told the Komsomolskaya Pravda tabloid in a 2020 interview.

Woodland told Komsomolskaya Pravda that he had wonderful adopted parents in the U.S. but moved to Russia to find his birth mother. They were eventually reunited on Russian state television.

Ksenia Karelina

Karelina, an aesthetician and manager at a spa salon in Beverly Hills, was initially detained in Yekaterinburg on Jan. 27 and sentenced to 14 days in jail on charges of "hooliganism," according to legal rights group Perviy Otdel.

Before she could make it out of the detention facility, Karelina was ordered to two months of pre-trial detention on suspicion of committing treason.

According to Perviy Otdel, the charges against Karelina are based on a $51.80 donation to human rights charity Razom for Ukraine that she made in February 2022 from her U.S. bank account.

Karelina, who has been living in the U.S. for over a decade, traveled to her native Yekaterinburg to visit family, her employer said.

If found guilty of treason, Karelina could face up to 20 years in prison.

An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Kurmasheva was detained in November 2023. It has been amended to reflect that she was detained in October.

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