

U.S. Journalist Evan Gershkovich Goes on Trial for Espionage in Closed Russian Court

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Natalia Kolesnikova / AFP

U.S. journalist Evan Gershkovich's trial for espionage in Russia begins behind closed doors Wednesday in what his employer, The Wall Street Journal, has already [slammed](#) as a “sham” process.

Gershkovich, 32, a former reporter for The Moscow Times, became the first Western journalist to be arrested in Russia on spying charges since the Cold War when he was detained by Federal Security Service (FSB) agents during a reporting trip last March.

He, his employer and the U.S. government strongly deny the accusations against him.

On Wednesday, he appeared in the glass defendants' cage at Yekaterinburg's Sverdlovsk Regional Court, smiling and greeting journalists, according to correspondents in the courtroom. Just a few minutes later, journalists were asked to leave the courtroom so that

proceedings could start.

The beginning of his trial comes 15 months after his detention. He has spent that time in Moscow's Lefortovo Prison, a facility [notorious](#) for its isolated conditions.

Gershkovich faces a maximum prison sentence of 20 years if he is convicted, an outcome that is all but certain.

"When his case comes before a judge this week, it will not be a trial as we understand it, with a presumption of innocence and a search for the truth," Wall Street Journal editor-in-chief Emma Tucker [said](#) in a statement ahead of the trial.

"Rather, it will be held in secret. No evidence has been unveiled. And we already know the conclusion: This bogus accusation of espionage will inevitably lead to a bogus conviction for an innocent man who would then face up to 20 years in prison for simply doing his job. And an excellent job he was doing, at that," Tucker said.

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The Kremlin claims to have caught Gershkovich "red-handed" but has otherwise not made any details of his case public.

This month, Russia's prosecutor general [accused](#) him of working for the CIA and "collecting secret information" about tank maker Uralvagonzavod in the Sverdlovsk region where he was arrested.

The United States [considers](#) Gershkovich to be "wrongfully detained," meaning it effectively regards him as a political hostage.

But negotiations to free him through a prisoner exchange have been complicated by the fraught diplomatic relations between Washington and Moscow due to the invasion of Ukraine and a litany of other disagreements.

In an interview with U.S. right-wing media personality Tucker Carlson in February, President Vladimir Putin said that he would be open to a prisoner swap involving Gershkovich.

He [indicated](#) that he would like to see Vadim Krasikov, an FSB operative serving a life sentence in Germany for assassinating an exiled former Chechen commander in Berlin in 2019, included in the exchange.

Hours after the trial opened on Wednesday, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov [said](#) U.S. officials "should still seriously consider the signals that they in Washington received through the relevant channels."

Gershkovich's family has said they are counting on a "very personal" promise from President Joe Biden to bring him home.

"We expect that all parties will work to bring Evan home now," The Wall Street Journal [said](#) in a statement ahead of his trial. "Time is of the essence. As we've said, the Russian regime's

smearing of Evan is repugnant and based on calculated and transparent lies. Journalism is not a crime, and Evan's case is an assault on free press."

Related article: ['A Very Grim Milestone': Evan Gershkovich Marks 1 Year in Russian Jail](#)

Gershkovich is one of several Americans currently held in Russia on disputed charges in what observers say is part of a strategy of "hostage diplomacy."

Washington accuses Moscow of arresting its citizens on baseless charges to use them as bargaining chips to secure the release of Russians imprisoned abroad.

Alsu Kurmasheva, a journalist for the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty news agency, was arrested on charges of failing to register as a "foreign agent" while visiting family members last year and now faces up to 10 years on charges of spreading "false information" about the Russian army.

Former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16-year prison sentence on espionage charges he strongly denies, has [pushed](#) to be included in a prisoner swap involving Gershkovich.

This month, Ksenia Karelina, a dual U.S.-Russian citizen accused of donating around \$50 to a Ukrainian charity, went on trial for treason.

"There is no such legal procedure as a [prisoner] swap. Swaps are a political will of representatives of two states implemented through legal procedures," Yevgeny Smirnov, a lawyer from the Perviy Otdel human rights project, told The Moscow Times this month.

These exchanges are typically formalized through a presidential pardon, which can only be issued after the sentence enters into legal force, Smirnov said.

"In any case, it will be necessary [for Gershkovich's case] to go through the original jurisdiction court and wait for the sentence to become final," Smirnov said.

But Russia has the "upper hand" in any exchange, as it holds more potential candidates for prisoner swaps compared to its Western adversaries.

"Several Americans are in Russian prisons, as well as many Europeans, including French and Germans, among others. Meanwhile, there are not many Russian citizens abroad whose return is of interest to the Russian authorities," Smirnov said.

"It's as if Russia has 50 aces while the West has only a couple."

Gershkovich, who grew up in New Jersey with his parents who emigrated from the Soviet Union, was a reporter for The Moscow Times from 2017 to 2020.

He then worked at AFP's Moscow bureau before joining The Wall Street Journal in January 2022.

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