The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Sentences Evan Gershkovich to 16 Years in Prison on Spying Charges

July 19, 2024



Evan Gershkovich. **AP / TASS**

Updated with sentencing, Smirnov's comments, White House statement.

A judge in Russia's Sverdlovsk region on Friday sentenced Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich to 16 years in prison on spying charges, a forgone conclusion in a closed trial that has been condemned as a sham by Washington and the journalist's employer.

"The court finds Evan Gershkovich guilty of committing the crime [of espionage]... and sentences him to 16 years imprisonment in a maximum-security penal colony," the judge said, delivering the verdict as the U.S. reporter listened from inside a glass defendant's cage in the courtroom.

The judge added that the nearly 500 days Gershkovich spent in pre-trial detention would count toward his prison sentence, which the reporter's defense team can appeal in the coming days, though it was not immediately clear if they plan to do so.

“Gershkovich, do you understand the sentence?” the judge asked, in response to which the American journalist nodded. After that, the judge adjourned the court and Gershkovich was removed by law enforcement officers.

State prosecutors had asked the judge to impose an 18-year sentence for Gershkovich on the spying charges, which carry a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. The U.S. reporter, who was arrested while on a reporting trip in March 2023, pleaded not guilty to the charges.

On Friday, the Sverdlovsk Regional Court heard closing arguments in the brief trial after resuming hearings the previous day following a request from Gershkovich’s defense team to move the hearing date — originally set for Aug. 13. The trial, which has been closed to the media, began in late June, some 15 months after the reporter’s detention.

Related article: ‘A Very Grim Milestone’: Evan Gershkovich Marks 1 Year in Russian Jail

The Wall Street Journal slammed the verdict against Gershkovich after it was announced on Friday.

“This disgraceful, sham conviction comes after Evan has spent 478 days in prison, wrongfully detained, away from his family and friends, prevented from reporting, all for doing his job as a journalist,” Almar Latour, the chief executive of Dow Jones and publisher of The Wall Street Journal, and Wall Street Journal Editor in Chief Emma Tucker said in a statement.

“We will continue to do everything possible to press for Evan’s release and to support his family,” the two said. “Journalism is not a crime, and we will not rest until he’s released. This must end now.”

Gershkovich, who reported for The Moscow Times between 2017 and 2020, became the first Western journalist to be arrested in Russia on spying charges since the Cold War after he was detained in the Sverdlovsk region during a reporting trip in March 2023. He is now also the first Western journalist to be convicted of that crime in Russia.

Before being moved to the Sverdlovsk region capital of Yekaterinburg to stand trial, Gershkovich spent months at Moscow’s notorious Lefortovo prison, where Russia has held political prisoners going back to the Soviet period.

Russia’s prosecutor general last month accused him of working for the CIA and “collecting secret information” about tank maker Uralvagonzavod in the Sverdlovsk region where he was arrested.

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

Unlike similar court cases, Gershkovich’s trial moved unusually fast in Russia’s politicized legal system, suggesting that the authorities in Moscow may be close to reaching a deal with the West in previously reported negotiations for a prisoner exchange involving the journalist.

“Given the fact that they [Russian authorities] rapidly accelerated the timeline of the case… it likely means that either some [closed door] processes are happening or all of [Gershkovich’s]

rights to a defense have been violated," Yevgeny Smirnov, a lawyer from the Perviy Otdel human rights project, told The Moscow Times.

"When it comes to espionage cases against foreigners in Russia, the final sentencing, as a rule, depends on how politicized the case is," Smirnov added. "There is no doubt that the case against Gershkovich is politicized. It is being discussed at the highest level."

The U.S. government has said that Gershkovich was "wrongfully detained," meaning it effectively regards him as a political hostage. So, too, has The Wall Street Journal slammed the accusations of espionage as "bogus."

On Friday, the White House said it was "pushing hard for Evan's release and will continue to do so."

"[H]e was targeted by the Russian government because he is a journalist and an American," U.S. President Joe Biden said in a statement. "Evan has endured his ordeal with remarkable strength. We will not cease in our efforts to bring him home."

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

Russian President Vladimir Putin previously suggested he is open to a prisoner swap with Washington involving Gershkovich. The Kremlin chief has indicated he would like to see Vadim Krasikov, a Federal Security Service (FSB) operative currently serving a life sentence in Germany for assassinating an exiled former Chechen commander in Berlin in 2019, included in the exchange.

After Gershkovich's espionage trial opened last month, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said U.S. officials "should still seriously consider the signals that they in Washington received through the relevant channels." And on Wednesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Moscow and the U.S. were discussing an exchange involving Gershkovich.

The journalist's friend and former colleague at The Moscow Times, Pjotr Sauer, who currently reports for The Guardian, reacted to the sentencing on Friday by writing on X (formerly Twitter): "I have no words to describe this farce. Let's get Evan out of there."

Related article: From Gershkovich to Gadzhiev: 9 Journalists Jailed in Russia

After scores of foreign correspondents left Russia amid the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the passage of wartime censorship laws, Gershkovich returned to the country to report on how it was being reshaped by the war.

At the same time, Gershkovich is just 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 — including Radio Liberty journalist Alsu Kurmasheva and former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan — on baseless charges to use them as bargaining chips to secure the release of Russians imprisoned abroad.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/07/19/russia-sentences-evan-gershkovich-to-16-years-in-prison-on-spying-charges-a85762