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Russia Frees Political Prisoners, Journalists in Landmark Exchange With West

By Moscow Times Reporter

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Clockwise from top left: Evan Gershkovich, Oleg Orlov, Lilia Chanysheva, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Sasha Skochilenko, Ilya Yashin, Kevin Lik and Ksenia Fadeyeva. **Collage MT**

U.S. journalist Evan Gershkovich, ex-U.S. Marine Paul Whelan, Russian-British opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza and U.S.-Russian journalist Alsu Kurmasheva were freed from Russian prison on Thursday, in the largest and most complex prisoner exchange between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War.

The four were released in a swap involving over a dozen other journalists, dissidents and other political prisoners in Russia in exchange for Russians held in the West for crimes including murder and cybercrime.

“The deal that secured their freedom was a feat of diplomacy. All told, we’ve negotiated the

release of 16 people from Russia — including five Germans and seven Russian citizens who were political prisoners in their own country," the White House said in a statement.

A total of 24 prisoners were exchanged at an airport in the Turkish capital Ankara, The Wall Street Journal wrote.

"The prisoners are from the U.S., Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Norway, Russia and Belarus," the BBC reported, citing the presidency of Turkey, which said it acted as a mediator in the swap.

Among those freed from Russia on Thursday are opposition activists Ilya Yashin and Andrei Pivovarov; Memorial co-founder Oleg Orlov; former Navalny coordinators Lilia Chanysheva, Ksenia Fadeyeva and Vadim Ostanin; artist Sasha Skochilenko; German-Russian activist Herman Moyzhes; and Kevin Lik, 19, a Russian-German citizen jailed for treason.

They were exchanged for eight Russians held in the West, most notably Vadim Krasikov, an FSB colonel serving a life sentence in Germany for the 2019 killing of a former Chechen rebel commander that Berlin says was carried out on Moscow's orders.

President Vladimir Putin personally greeted the returned Russians as they disembarked from their plane at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport and escorted them down a red carpet on the tarmac before promising them state awards.

The exchange of Gershkovich, 32, a Wall Street Journal correspondent and former Moscow Times reporter, comes weeks after he was sentenced to 16 years in prison for espionage — charges that he, his employer and the U.S. strongly denied.

"We are overwhelmed with relief and elated for Evan and his family, as well as for the others who were released. At the same time, we condemn in the strongest terms Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia, which orchestrated Evan's 491-day wrongful imprisonment based on sham accusations and a fake trial as part of an all-out assault on the free press and truth," Dow Jones CEO and Wall Street Journal publisher Almar Latour and WSJ Editor in Chief Emma Tucker said in a statement.

Moscow did not share any evidence for its accusations against Gershkovich, only stating that "the court established and documented" that he "collected secret information" on a tank factory in the Ural Mountains region of Sverdlovsk "on instructions from the CIA."

Related article: How the Russia Swap Happened: Secret Talks, a Hitman, and Biden's Fateful Call

Whelan, 54, had been serving a 16-year sentence for espionage, a charge the U.S. government said was without merit. The former U.S. Marine, who also holds British, Irish and Canadian passports, had been working in security for a U.S. vehicle parts company when he was arrested in Moscow in 2018.

Gershkovich and Whelan, whom the U.S. classified as "wrongfully detained," were among several Americans held in Russia in what observers say is part of a strategy of "hostage

diplomacy."

Vladimir Kara-Murza

Opposition politician and journalist Kara-Murza, 42, was serving a 25-year prison sentence for treason and other charges for his criticism of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and calls to Western countries to impose sanctions against the Kremlin.

His family and supporters have raised alarm over his health, which is said to have deteriorated in prison due to a nerve condition he sustained after surviving two poisoning attempts in the 2010s, and he was hospitalized in July.

Bill Browder, who worked with Kara-Murza to lobby the U.S. to pass the Magnitsky Act, welcomed his release in a statement to The Moscow Times.

"Vladimir publicly protested Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine and Putin's repressive dictatorship. For that he was arrested, given the longest sentence of any political prisoner of 25 years, and subjected to torture, denial of medical care, solitary confinement and other inhumane conditions to try to break his health and his spirit," Browder said.

"Throughout this entire ordeal Vladimir has held his head high, his spirits strong and has never wavered in his conviction that Russia could be a free country. Vladimir's fight has set an extraordinary example for millions of Russians who wish for the Putin regime to fall and for a peaceful and democratic regime in their country."

Price-tag protests

St. Petersburg artist Sasha Skochilenko, 33, was sentenced in 2023 to seven years in prison on charges of spreading "fake news" about the Russian Armed Forces after she replaced six supermarket price tags with similar tags displaying information about the war in Ukraine and civilian deaths in the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol.

"I expected nothing, and it was a complete surprise to me. At first, Sasha was taken somewhere, and we searched for her for two days. We were in a panic — we were afraid, for example, of a new criminal case or something else," Skochilenko's mother Nadezhda told The Moscow Times. "The exchange seemed so surreal. We couldn't even imagine it and were very worried for the first two days."

"When we realized that an exchange was likely, we still worried because an exchange is a very serious undertaking. I immediately calculated how many risks there could be. Moreover, agreements might not be fulfilled, and something could go wrong.

"Tomorrow we are flying to Germany — I don't know what awaits us when we arrive, whether we will be able to see Sasha immediately or if we will have to wait longer. But today — it cannot be compared to any other in terms of happiness; I have never had a day like this.

"Sasha is an ordinary citizen. In the exchange, we have such wonderful people who are real heroes of Russia, so to speak, like Orlov and Yashin. I don't consider Sasha to be any less. I believe she is one of them because speaking about peace and love in a country at war is very commendable."

Veteran activist

Also among those freed on Thursday was Oleg Orlov, 71, the co-founder of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Memorial human rights group who was sentenced in 2024 for speaking out against the war in Ukraine.

His release "is wonderful because Oleg is a person who has committed no crimes and has spoken the truth. Moreover, the truthfulness of his statements was confirmed by his own trial," Memorial member Alexander Cherkasov told The Moscow Times, noting that some 700 political prisoners remain in Russian prisons.

"On one hand, wonderful people who have committed no crimes will be released. On the other hand, they are releasing a murderer and unsuccessful spies. For Putin, such people are valuable. He needs to maintain the sense and motivation of other similar agents that they can do whatever they want, and we will rescue you. But, again, this is the responsibility of the authorities — whom they consider their own."

'The Alexei Navalny Exchange'

While news of the exchange came as a relief to the families and friends of those freed, it was a bittersweet moment for supporters of late opposition figure Alexei Navalny.

Shortly after Navalny died in an Arctic prison in February, his allies suggested that exchange talks involving Navalny and Gershkovich had been in their final stages at the time of his death.

A source close to the Kremlin told Reuters in February that Moscow and the West had agreed “in principle to make an exchange involving Navalny and Gershkovich,” but that the terms had not been finalized at that time.

On Thursday, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan confirmed that Navalny was supposed to be a part of the exchange.

"This is a historic exchange and in my opinion it should go down in history under the name 'The Alexei Navalny Exchange'," Navalny's longtime ally, opposition activist Lyubov Sobol, told The Moscow Times.

"I am very happy for all of those who are free today. But we know that Alexei was supposed to be released back in February. It was he who was proposed to be exchanged for Putin's murderer Krasikov. But Putin decided to kill Navalny. Every day I think of Alexei, and it is impossible not to think of him today as well."

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