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Freed U.S.-Russian Journalist Alsu Kurmasheva: 'Our Work Right Now Is to Be a Witness to History'

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Alsu Kurmasheva. **Yegor Aleyev / TASS**

Alsu Kurmasheva, a longtime journalist for the U.S.-funded RFE/RL news outlet's Tatar-Bashkir service, became the second U.S. journalist to be jailed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine when she was detained in October 2023.

The dual U.S.-Russian citizen, who lives in Prague, was sentenced to 6.5 years in prison in July on charges of spreading "false information" about the Kremlin's war in Ukraine that her family and employer denied. Just weeks later on Aug. 1, she was freed in a historic prisoner exchange between Russia and the West.

Ahead of accepting the Committee to Protect Journalists' International Press Freedom Award in New York, Kurmasheva spoke to The Moscow Times about her experience in prison, the

prisoner swap, life since being released and raising awareness for her imprisoned colleagues.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The Moscow Times: Before your arrest, you worked for Radio Free Europe's Tatar-Bashkir service, where you covered issues facing these Indigenous communities and human rights. Considering the intensified pressure on Indigenous activism since the invasion, it seems like this may have been one of the reasons why you were targeted. Would you say so?

Alsu Kurmasheva: I've been working as a journalist for Radio Free Europe for more than 20 years. ... I saw my mission there to give a voice to the Tatar community who had no free media, no resources and not even education to openly speak. It's like centuries of oppression. The Radio Free Europe Tatar-Bashkir service was really great in its mission. I loved every minute and every day of working, I loved every project.

There were better times in terms of press freedom, there were worse times. During better times, my radio shows were on local FM stations in Kazan and people would recognize my voice. There were worse times during the Cold War, but I knew about them only from books and archives, and the worse times for press freedom are now. The journalists at RFE have always faced those risks because they're a media company with more than 70 years of history broadcasting to countries where there is no press freedom. ... There were certain risks, of course. But nobody would think that the Russian authorities would go so far as to imprison a journalist, a mother of two children, a woman in her native Tatarstan, in her native Kazan where people know me.

The other element was your U.S. citizenship.

That was another irony of it. I was kept there exactly because I was an American citizen and I was a journalist. They were treating me as a Russian prisoner — even worse, because I didn't have access to phone calls with my family, which other inmates had. It's very important in prison to have at least a 10-15 minute weekly phone call with your loved ones. We're not talking about visits; of course, those were banned. I was lucky to have visits from a lawyer and I was getting lots of letters.

What is life like in a Russian women's prison, and did your treatment differ from that of other inmates?

Women in prisons are driven by fear and get no support from outside. If every male prisoner has a girlfriend or a wife or a mother outside waiting for him, sending letters and sending food packages, women don't have that. Most of them have problems with their families. Most of them don't have husbands or boyfriends. And those who have children, the children are either in orphanages or, in the best case scenario, are being taken in by their relatives or extended family. They can't rely on anybody else and they rely only on themselves.

Any wrongdoing — and by wrongdoing, I mean, you're not making your bed correctly or you don't get up at 6 a.m. exactly when you have to get up, but there is no clock, there is no track of time — these 'wrongdoings' result in punishments, and the punishment is the extension of the sentence. All those things are making a huge impact on the emotional and physical well-being of women.

Another thing is the conditions, at least in the prison where I was in Kazan. It's an old prison dating back to the end of the 19th century. The conditions were very bad. There was no hot water in winter — short, very short showers twice a week. It has a huge impact on emotional well-being when women can't afford to have their basic hygienic standards.

Another thing I've noticed among women prisoners is that they're not willing to unite, to cooperate. There are individual acts of kindness and support, of course, but it's harder for women to fight for their rights in prison. I take this as a consequence of the [wider] situation in the country where it's harder for women to fight for their rights and support their rights.

Were you able to make connections or find some kind of support system in this environment?

I spent the last three months in a bigger cell with 10 other women. I found two incredible young women, one was a university math student and she was giving me math lessons in exchange for English. ... It was great. It was distracting for both of us. At some point, months later, she told me that she was giving me tasks from her university program, and I was so proud of myself.

There was another young lady from Morocco. Her French and Arabic were native and my French and Arabic have been on a very basic beginner level for my whole life. I found it was a great opportunity to learn those languages from her. And she was a former soccer coach. So this is how we spent our days when we didn't have to go anywhere, exercising and speaking French and Arabic when we could. Of course, those cases were very, very unique.

How often were you able to receive letters from your family?

My mom and I were exchanging usual letters through the post, and it took three or four days for them to be delivered. I had very limited communication with my husband, Pavel, and my daughters. It was only possible through the lawyers, and the lawyers are not allowed to bring in any communication. So most of the time it was very short messages passed on through the lawyer and no details. I didn't know anything about the interviews they were doing to raise awareness. I didn't know anything about the advocacy campaign. I would only get short sentences like, ‘Alsu, we'll get you out, I'm hopeful.’ That was once in a while. I would lie down on my bed back in the cell and think for hours about what it might be.

I'll be honest with you, for months, the future looked very grim, very sad. I knew what was happening with other cases like mine. I was so lucky to be getting a news digest from the volunteers. I still don't know who was working on that, but I'm sure people will recognize their efforts right now when I say that. ... I knew that the development wasn't a positive one. I knew that those long sentences people were getting were the same charges.

I love to plan, even if it's a bad one. Of course, my plan A was to get released. I didn't know how. I knew that there were other prominent Americans ahead of me who had been in custody for a longer time, like Evan Gershkovich and Paul Whelan. I'm sure there were other ones who we didn't know about. The investigators never mentioned the word ‘exchange’ for a very long time. ... I was hoping that the sentence wouldn't be that long, that I would serve that sentence and be back home. But I didn't know.

Let’s talk about the prisoner swap — I'm sure you had little prior knowledge that something

was being planned, and then you're suddenly on a plane with Evan and Paul Whelan...

I knew something would happen sooner or later in July when they suddenly rushed my trial. And then I learned that my trial was on the same day as Evan's, so it gave me a big hope, actually. When I was being transferred to Moscow, though they didn't tell me where they were taking me, I was, again, very hopeful. It was like a chain of hope. I was also very hopeful when I saw all the prisoners and Evan and Paul on the bus, and I thought, 'Well, this might be it.'

But still, everything was so fragile, and I learned that only when I came back. I'm so thankful to all the governments for their kindness, and for releasing me and accepting me, because that meant a lot. If they had left me behind this time, which happened many times to Paul, I mean, what could I have done? I don't know. I couldn't have done anything, but it would have severely damaged my well-being and my physical health too. My health was deteriorating tremendously. I've gone through certain medical procedures since I've been back. All is good now and will be better hopefully, but those nine and a half months in those conditions just had a huge impact on my health.

How has readjusting to life been? Were there things that you didn't expect would be difficult?

Well, if I say nothing is difficult, it'll be a bit emotional. But every time I'm facing difficulty in dealing with any kind of problem, I just turn on my flashbacks and memory, which is still very fresh, saying 'This is the beauty of the free world that I'm dealing with this now. And I have ways to solve this problem.' That helps me a lot. Really, nothing is difficult. But I need time to process. There have been so many changes globally, in Europe, in America, in Russia.

I started with my family and my children. I'm not going global right now. I really want to stay low-key. This is what I think everybody should do if you're facing a lot, and you think that you're not going to deal with this huge trauma or troubling situation. Just start from yourself and your very close surrounding environment.

So I'm learning to talk to my children again, because they've grown up so much, and not only physically, but mentally. Sometimes the language they speak sounds like a foreign language to me, because they're teenagers. They're so patient and so supportive. They are teaching me those words and phrases, which I'm so happy for. And then I try to use them, and they say, 'Mommy, don't.' You know what I mean, right?

Yeah, like the Gen Z language.

I'm not back on TikTok just to learn that, I don't want to. They said that they will be giving me that information. I'm trying to understand why they're acting a certain way, and I'm really proud of them. They were champions of my advocacy campaign, and Bibi was the face of my advocacy campaign. I'm really proud. She learned so much. I'm supporting her in her education and her curiosity to learn more about Russia and the world. She's taking a global politics class and economy, which is great, which is very natural for our family, and I'm really supporting her. This is what I'm focusing on, my children and family.

From there, I'll jump into your question about what is next. I'm slowly going into, I wouldn't call it advocacy, but rather support of families of my imprisoned colleagues ... because I know exactly what they're going through. Every morning they wake up — most of them can't sleep

— and the only thought that goes through their mind is 'What else can I do for my loved one? Who else can I talk to?' And then there's that feeling that even my husband described to me when I came back, where they do a lot, they do almost everything, and still the doors are closed. ...

The most worrying situation is with our Belarusian colleagues in Belarus, Ihar Losik and Andrei Kuznechyk. Ihar has been incommunicado for four years. Vladyslav Yesypenko is in Russian-controlled Crimea, he hasn't seen his wife and little daughter for three years. And there is Farid Mehralizada in Azerbaijan, a prominent economist and journalist who was detained six months ago. Again, a very similar case to mine, where they detained journalists not on journalism charges, but basically it is for journalism and for doing their job well.

You're receiving CPJ's International Press Freedom Award, and you are taking a stand for press freedom. I've been a journalist for almost 10 years, and it seems like every year, it just gets worse and worse around the world.

Well, you're very right. Free journalism, objective journalism, is more important than ever. Who if not The Moscow Times, and who if not RFE/RL, knows that? We journalists, our work is always more important when there is trouble, when there is uncertainty. ...

Of course, I wasn't thinking of any awards. My biggest award has always been serving my audience, their feedback. I've done so for more than 20 years. I was delivering uncensored, objective information to my Tatar community in Tatar and Russian languages. Our work at RFE/RL was very highly valued by our audience. That's the most important award you can receive. But I'm extremely honored to receive the CPJ International Press Freedom Award, as it will be so instrumental in raising awareness of imprisoned journalists in Russia. I believe, and I might be mistaken, that there are more than 20 journalists imprisoned in Russia right now. Journalism is not a crime. They should be released.

Our work right now is to document what is happening and to be a witness to history. That's important. These times will be over. Sooner or later, they will be over. We know from history. And everybody should do what their mission is and what they are supposed to do.

You have done a lot of work to promote Tatar language and culture. My favorite anecdote was from our article that said you narrated a popular Tatar-language course, and so many people just know you by your voice because they studied that way. Moving forward, do you think you'll continue to be a voice for that community?

I got dozens of letters in prison from people saying that they started learning Tatar after I was arrested because they found that project. Well, it warmed my heart. It meant the world to me.

Whatever I will be doing, my identity will stay with me, my Tatar identity and who I am. The Tatar community is spread all around the world. There's a big Tatar community in the United States. I will be happy to serve them as well... I really don't know what I'm going to do [yet], but I definitely want my voice to be heard by a wider community and wider audience. I want to share my experience and my vision. I'm sure I will stay connected to my audience always, one way or another, for sure.

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