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French Researcher Back in France After Prisoner Swap With Russia

By Delphine Touitou for AFP and Celine Cornu for AFP

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Laurent Vinatier at a hearing at the Zamoskvoretsky District Court. **Yulia Morozova / TASS**

French researcher Laurent Vinatier arrived in France on Thursday following a prisoner exchange involving a Russian basketball player wanted in the United States, officials said.

The prisoner swap took place after both Moscow and Paris had signaled they were ready to re-establish dialogue nearly four years after Russia invaded Ukraine.

Vinatier was released in exchange for 26-year-old basketball player Daniil Kasatkin, arrested by France last June on U.S. hacking charges.

"Our compatriot Laurent Vinatier is free and back in France," President Emmanuel Macron wrote on X. "I share the relief felt by his family and loved ones."

He was reunited with his parents and received by France's top diplomat Jean-Noel Barrot at the French Foreign Ministry after arriving at a military base near Paris.

Vinatier — who was working for a Swiss conflict-mediation NGO at the time of his arrest — was arrested in Russia in June 2024 while gathering what prosecutors said was information about Russia's military activities.

Sentenced to three years for failing to register as a "foreign agent," he faced new spying charges that could have seen him sentenced to up to 20 years in jail.

The Kremlin announced last month that it had made an offer to France regarding Vinatier, raising hopes he could be freed.

Vinatier 'pardoned'

Russian state television outlets published a video of a smiling Vinatier being released from jail, dressed in black and carrying a large black duffel bag.

Russia's FSB security service said Vinatier had been "pardoned" by presidential decree.

Paris informed Washington of the basketball player's return to Russia, a source familiar with the case said.

Embed:

> State TV outlets published a video of a smiling Vinatier being released from jail, dressed in black and with a black duffel bag. He is later seen boarding an aircraft. pic.twitter.com/NAPfHs7ipi
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> — The Moscow Times (@MoscowTimes) January 8, 2026

In December, the Kremlin said Vladimir Putin had "expressed readiness to engage in dialogue" with Macron, after the French leader said Europe should reach out to Russia over ending the war in Ukraine.

Asked on Thursday about a possible resumption of bilateral talks with Russia, French diplomats declined to comment.

'Huge relief'

Western countries have long accused Russia of arresting their citizens to use as bargaining chips to secure the release of alleged Russian spies and cyber criminals jailed in Europe and the United States.

Kasatkin, whom France released in the deal, was arrested last year at a Paris airport at the request of the United States.

The United States accused him of having allegedly taken part in a ransomware hacking ring, a charge he denied.

Video posted by the FSB security service showed Kasatkin arriving in Russia and entering a minibus.

Relations between France and Russia have deteriorated dramatically since Putin invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

Moscow has directed much of the blame for the war at Paris and other European capitals.

France, one of Ukraine's key backers, says Russia is solely responsible for the conflict and could end it if it wished.

An expert on Russia and the former Soviet Union, Vinatier penned more than a dozen academic papers and had previous experience working at NATO and the European Parliament, according to his resume.

At the time of his arrest, he was working for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Swiss NGO that mediates conflicts outside official diplomatic channels, particularly pertaining to Ukraine.

The NGO welcomed the release of "our dear colleague."

"Laurent's colleagues and friends are overjoyed at his return and stand in solidarity with him and his family as they move forward," it said.

During his trial, Vinatier had pleaded guilty and asked for a "merciful" sentence, while quoting Russia's national poet, Alexander Pushkin.

A lawyer representing Vinatier's family praised his return as a "huge relief."

"We are extremely happy that he has been released for Orthodox Christmas," Frederic Belot, who also represents the basketball player, told AFP. "It's a strong sign."

Orthodox Christians marked Orthodox Christmas on Jan. 7 Wednesday.

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