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Free the Kremlin's Political Prisoners – And Stop Sending It New Ones

By OVD-Info

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Andrey Lyubimov / Moscow Agency

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In late September, The Atlantic reported that United States President Donald Trump had greenlit plans to offer Russia sanctions relief in exchange for the release of political prisoners.

With peace talks still deadlocked after more than a year of U.S. diplomacy, sanctions remain a vital check on Russia's ability to wage war against Ukraine. In the following weeks, however, Trump struck a diesel deal with Russian president Vladimir Putin and waived new sanctions on Russian oil and gas. This provoked backlash from Kyiv, but Trump insisted that he was making "great progress" with Russia, including on "hostage negotiations."

Then, on October 21, the Kremlin freed Stephen Hubbard, a 74-year-old American citizen held in Russian captivity for over four years. In statements about the release, Trump said that the United States "was not required to give anything in return," while admitting that enforcing tougher sanctions would have halted negotiations for Hubbard's freedom.

As critics note, the release of Hubbard cost Putin little and making concessions risks incentivizing the regime to take more hostages. At the same time, a glaring contradiction is being overlooked. While Washington negotiates to free some prisoners, its immigration policy is funneling new ones into Russia's jails.

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No one knows exactly how many people Russia has arbitrarily detained in connection with its war against Ukraine. The international human rights campaign People First! estimates the number is in the tens of thousands; most are Ukrainian civilians imprisoned across Russia and occupied Ukraine. These "ghost prisoners" are held without formal charges. They are tortured and kept incommunicado with no access to lawyers, relatives, or international organizations.

In occupied Crimea, where Russia has enforced one of its harshest regimes since 2014, Ukrainian authorities have identified 223 political prisoners, including 155 Crimean Tatars and many with serious health problems.

According to OVD-Info data, at least 2,368 people are currently imprisoned in Russia for political reasons. The number of politically motivated criminal proceedings is even higher, with more than 5,000 active cases.

The #free120 campaign puts the total number of critically ill political prisoners at 406. Every year, several die behind bars.

People First! calls for any negotiated peace agreement to prioritize the immediate release of all these captives, alongside the return of Ukrainian children forcibly taken to Russia, the repatriation of POWs held by both sides, and the release of Belarusians imprisoned for their anti-war views.

When it comes to hostage negotiations, which are often treated as a separate diplomatic track, priority should go to the most vulnerable: minors and the elderly, the seriously ill, torture victims and those targeted for their sexuality, ethnicity, or faith. One-off exchanges offer no transparent or permanent mechanism for deciding who goes free.

In talks with Russia, Washington has long focused on freeing specific individuals, particularly its own citizens. In December 2022, for example, the Biden administration agreed to a controversial one-for-one exchange, trading notorious Russian arms dealer Victor Bout for Brittney Griner, an American basketball star imprisoned in Russia on drug charges.

Two years later, the United States orchestrated the biggest prisoner swap between Russia and Western countries since the Cold War. The Kremlin ultimately handed over 16 people — most of them Russian political prisoners — in exchange for eight FSB agents, hackers, and spies.

These releases were humanitarian achievements: unjustly imprisoned people regained their

freedom and lives were likely saved, even if the Russians among them were forced into exile. However, releases alone do not change what puts people behind bars. So long as the laws used to punish dissent remain in force, new cases will keep coming.

Related article: Belarus Frees 25 More Political Prisoners in Return for U.S. Sanctions Relief

The Kremlin has denied holding any political prisoners or engaging in talks on sanctions relief with American officials. But Trump's nomination of John Coale as U.S. envoy for hostage affairs suggests plans to replicate his strategy as special envoy to Belarus.

Having built a rapport with authoritarian leader Aleksander Lukashenko, Coale has secured the release of more than 500 political prisoners in exchange for easing U.S. sanctions. However, this has turned repression into a revolving door, with Minsk freeing certain people while continuing to imprison others on political grounds.

During Coale's last meeting with Lukashenko in September, the United States hoped to free 200 more political prisoners. He came away with 25 people in return for lifting U.S. sanctions on two Belarusian companies. According to Viasna, a leading Belarusian human rights group, at least 10 others were prepared for release and then sent back to their cells, likely due to the outcome of the talks.

At least 885 political prisoners remain behind bars in Belarus today. Every one is a person with loved ones awaiting their release. Under current U.S. policy, each is also a potential bargaining chip.

If the Senate confirms Coale's new position, his portfolio will expand to include Russia, among other authoritarian countries. Negotiations with such regimes demand a consistent strategy to save lives and effect systemic change.

To this end, Washington should push for the following simultaneously:

- the immediate release of Ukrainian civilians and political prisoners held by Russia;
- the repeal of repressive legislation targeting freedom of speech and civil society organizations (such as the laws on military censorship, "foreign agents," and "undesirable" organizations);
- an end to the arbitrary use of anti-terrorism, anti-extremism and national-security laws, including those on treason and espionage frequently used to target and severely punish political opponents and Ukrainian citizens.

At the very least, the United States should demand that the Kremlin disclose the identities and whereabouts of all detainees, and provide international organizations full access to them.

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Unfortunately, Washington is helping refill the Kremlin's "hostage bank." Under the Trump administration's deportation policy, Russians facing political persecution are being denied asylum in the United States and returned to their home country.

According to the BBC, removals surpassed 1,200 in 2025, up from 222 in 2023. Among these deportees were anti-war dissidents and army deserters, some of whom were handed military summonses, sent to the front, or arrested upon their return to Russia.

The imprisonment of activist Leonid Melekhin is a case in point. Melekhin spent 10 months in U.S. immigration detention, only to have his asylum bid rejected in July 2025. He was then deported to Russia, where he was arrested upon arrival on "terrorism" charges. On October 5, a Russian court sentenced Melekhin to six years in prison.

The activist's time in U.S. detention reportedly "broke him." Melekhin's state-appointed lawyer in Russia claims that he "asked to be sent back" to Russia. The conditions in ICE detention facilities are indeed concerning. As of this writing, Russian asylum seekers in at least three detention centers have joined hunger strikes to protest alleged mistreatment and poor conditions.

The Trump administration can act preemptively to support those facing political persecution in their home country. It should halt deportations, guarantee fair asylum hearings, end prolonged detentions, and protect dissidents, journalists and those who refuse to fight.

Freeing political prisoners is among diplomacy's most humane goals. To have the greatest impact, Washington should pair negotiations for releases with sustained pressure to dismantle the laws that fill prisons and ensure that those who escape persecution find refuge, not a return ticket to a cell.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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