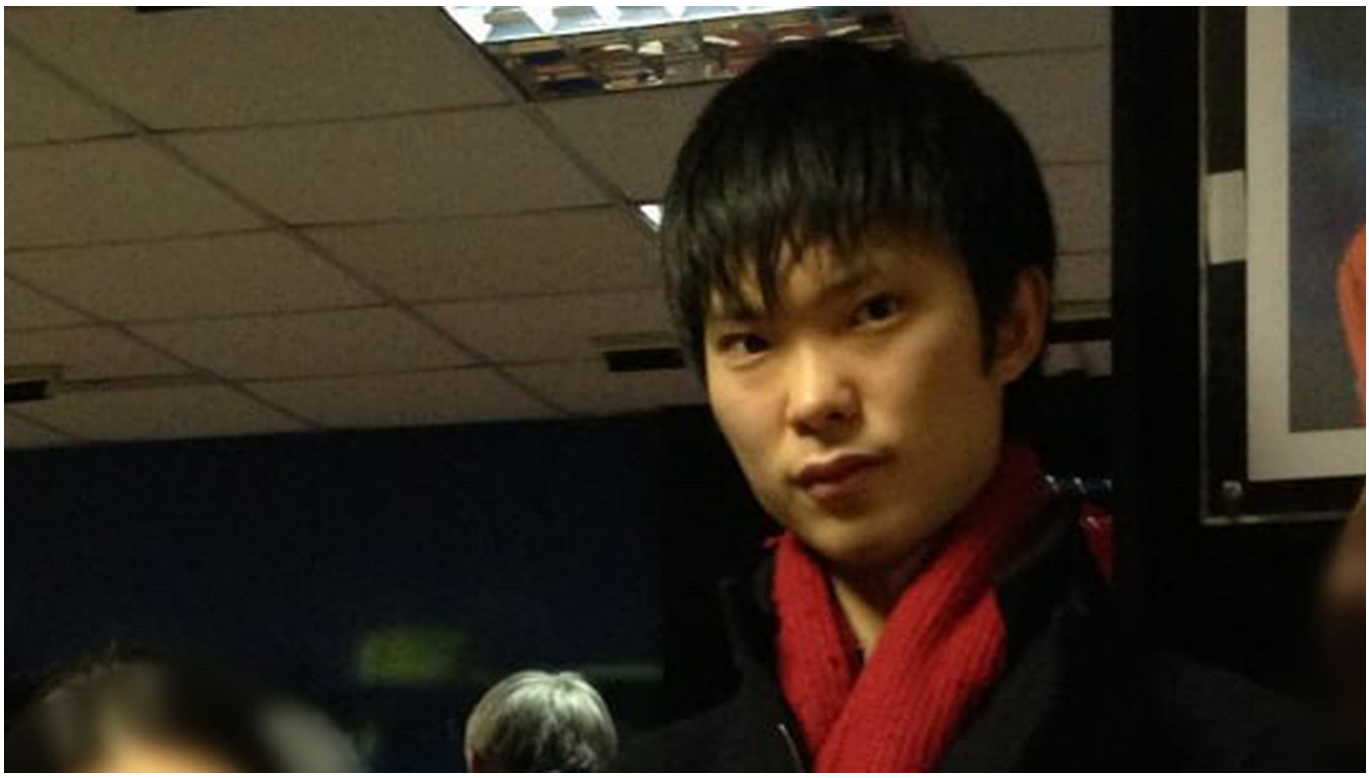
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# ‘He’s No Spy’: Former Colleagues Open Up About Japanese Journalist Arrested in Russia

By Brawley Benson

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Yuki Imai. **Social media**

When visa-free travel was possible, the Japanese journalist arrested on espionage charges in Russia last month once welcomed a Russian guest from the disputed Kuril Islands into his home as part of a cultural exchange program. Former colleagues say it was just one example of his deep interest in the country.

Yuki Imai, 34, a correspondent for the Hokkaido Shimbun newspaper, is now awaiting trial in Moscow’s Lefortovo Prison. After weeks of silence around the case, people in Japan who knew or met Imai during his journalism career have begun to speak out as Japanese officials push Russia for his release. The Moscow Times is one of the first English-language outlets to publish their comments.

Osamu Kuroda, who was Imai's boss from 2022-2023 when he worked in the northern Japanese city of Kushiro, told The Moscow Times in an email Thursday that even when he was covering city hall, Imai showed a passion for international affairs by writing human-centered stories about Japan's relationship with Russia.

"There are surely people in mainland Russia and the Northern Territories who remember Mr. Imai," Kuroda said, using the Japanese term for the four Russian-controlled islands off Japan's northern coast whose ownership is disputed by Tokyo.

Kuroda, who also recalled the story about Imai hosting a Russian guest, said he had heard from many former colleagues who were shocked and outraged by the arrest.

"Although our tenures didn't overlap, both Yuki and I have worked in Nemuro," Kuroda said, referring to another city on the northern island of Hokkaido. "The other day, a mutual acquaintance sent me a message saying, 'He was a reporter who went beyond the scope of his reporting to enthusiastically promote exchanges between people in Japan and Russia. That's precisely why his detention is so deeply regrettable'."

Another acquaintance recently told Kuroda: "If there are any Russians who know Yuki, they'd realize right away that he's no spy."

Imai's Oct. 13 arrest was the highest-profile detention of a foreign journalist in Russia since the 2023 arrest of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich.

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi reportedly raised the issue of Imai's detention when she met with President Vladimir Putin this week on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit. While the Japanese leader was said to have called for Imai's immediate release, a deal on a prisoner exchange was not announced. The two sides instead agreed to keep communication open.

On Monday, just over one month after masked men tackled Imai to the ground and arrested him at a hotel in the Far Eastern city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, International Press Institute (IPI) Executive Director Scott Griffen called the charges against him "baseless" and demanded his immediate release.

The statement follows a steady drumbeat of advocacy from press freedom organizations, Western officials and Japanese journalists.

**Related article**: In His Reporting, Japanese Journalist Yuki Imai Revealed a Fascination With Russia. Then He Was Arrested.

The Russian government alleges that Imai collected information for Japanese intelligence services about soldiers from the Kuril Islands fighting in Ukraine, charges that his employer denies.

According to the Hokkaido Shimbun, Imai joined the newspaper's copy-editing department in 2016. From there he worked his way up to reporting roles, rotating through postings in Nemuro, Kushiro and Tokyo before landing a coveted position as a Russia correspondent in 2024.

A persistent source of frustration for many advocates and analysts was the cloud of silence that hung over Imai's arrest. Even after Russian authorities released his name, Japanese officials did not acknowledge that Imai was the journalist who had been arrested.

In the weeks since his arrest, that has changed. Petitions calling for his release have cropped up online, former Hokkaido Shimbun reporters banded together to form an organization to raise awareness of his case and former colleagues have begun sharing their accounts publicly, speaking with Japanese media and posting messages of support.

Norihiko Tateno, deputy manager of legal affairs and public relations for the Hokkaido Shimbun Press, explained the company's decision to start publicly using Imai's name in an email to The Moscow Times.

"Until now, we had reported on Mr. Imai anonymously. This was because we prioritized ensuring his safety while in detention and had been carefully considering how to handle our reporting," Tateno said. "One month has now passed since his detention, and there is still no prospect of his release. In light of this, we concluded that we need to appeal clearly to the public using his real name."

The Hokkaido Shimbun has said that it has hired a lawyer in Russia to handle Imai's case. In the same message, Tateno said that "as far as we are aware, there are no major concerns regarding his health" in Lefortovo Prison.

He also said that Imai had not traveled to the Kuril Islands.

In line with Japanese government policy, "no Hokkaido Shimbun reporter stationed in Sakhalin on a Russian visa has ever traveled to the four islands, and Mr. Imai has never visited them," Tateno said.

Instead, the newspaper relies on Russian staff members to cover the islands, Tateno said.

"Our articles are compiled based on information provided by them and other sources," he said. "In such cases, the staff members travel in accordance with Russian procedures and operate under Russian domestic law."

"We will continue to work in cooperation with relevant organizations to ensure that Mr. Imai's safety and rights are protected, and we will do everything in our power to secure his return to Japan as soon as possible," Tateno added.

**Related article**: What Is Russia Trying to Achieve by Arresting a Japanese Journalist?

If convicted, Imai faces up to 20 years in prison. Analysts have called his arrest an attempt to pressure Japan over geopolitical grievances at a moment of heightened tensions between the two countries.

"Russia has decided that they want to apply pressure on Japan," James D.J. Brown, a professor of international relations at Temple University, Japan Campus, told The Moscow Times last month. "And frankly they regard Japan as likely to concede, so they feel they probably have a good chance of forcing some concessions."

For many who knew Imai, the arrest came as a shock. Their hope is that the whole ordeal will be over in the near future.

“I hope this detention is some kind of mistake and that he will be released soon,” Kuroda told The Moscow Times.

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