

## Paul Whelan released from Russia in prisoner swap that includes reporter Evan Gershkovich



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Detroit Free Press

Paul Whelan, the Michigan man who has been held prisoner in Russia for five years, seven months, one week and a day on false charges of espionage, was freed Thursday in a deal that included Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who also was wrongfully detained on spying charges the U.S. government says he didn't commit, along with journalist Alsu Kurmasheva, and dissident Vladimir Kara-Murza.

Russia released the three Americans and one green-card holder as part of a major prisoner swap with the U.S., the White House said Thursday.

"The deal that secured their freedom was a feat of diplomacy," President Joe Biden said in a statement. "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. Some of these women and men have been unjustly held for years. All have endured unimaginable suffering and uncertainty. Today, their agony is over."



U.S. allies, which include Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Norway, and Turkey, helped broker the deal, Biden said.

"This is a powerful example of why it's vital to have friends in this world whom you can trust and depend upon. Our alliances make Americans safer," he said.

Later, speaking to the press with Whelan's sister, Elizabeth Whelan, standing next to him, Biden said, "Their brutal ordeal is over and they're free." And one point, he reached over and took Elizabeth Whelan's hand, saying of the prisoners' families, "I can't imagine what they've been through."

Mayor and Council –

News broke today that former Novi resident Paul Whelan had been released from captivity in Russia. Mr. Whelan lived in an apartment here in Novi. Chief Zinser and I have been in contact with our federal representatives to determine where he will be returning to after landing at Andrews Airforce Base later today.

- Victor

Biden brought the families to Oval Office to speak to their loved ones by phone just after the swap in Turkey in what National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan described as an "overjoyed" atmosphere. Sullivan, who also became emotional while describing the historic swap, called the diplomatic effort "vintage" Biden and noted that the president made a call to the prime minister of Slovenia to finalize arrangements on Sunday, July 21 – a short time before the president announced [he was stepping aside as the Democratic Party's presidential nominee](#) this year, in favor of Vice President Kamala Harris.

Biden and Harris were expected to greet Whelan, Gershkovich and Kurmasheva at Andrews Air Force Base late Thursday night.

Bloomberg News reported the three American citizens and one green-card holder traveled by plane out of Russia early Thursday. The U.S. and its allies will return prisoners to Russia that they hold under the deal, sources said, asking for anonymity to discuss matters that aren't yet public.

"Today, we celebrate the return of Paul, Evan, Alsu, and Vladimir and rejoice with their families," Biden said. "We remember all those still wrongfully detained or held hostage around the world. And reaffirm our pledge to their families: We see you. We are with you. And we will never stop working to bring your loved ones home where they belong."

Whelan's twin brother, David, asked for privacy in the days and weeks ahead, as Paul Whelan and the other Americans adjust to life back in the United States.

"This is now Paul's story to tell and I'm sure he will, in time, communicate how he wants to tell it," [David Whelan said in a statement](#). "It is vital that he be given agency over his life again, something the Kremlin took away for so many years. I do not represent him.

"Every story has an ending and this is the end of the story of our family's advocacy for Paul."

It's been a long time coming, U.S. Rep. Haley Stevens, D-Birmingham, said in a tweet posted to the social media platform X.

"Paul, after more than five years, we finally get to say, welcome home," Stevens wrote. "You lost your job, your home, and your dog, but you never lost your faith, and we never lost our faith in you. Your family have been tireless advocates and we cannot wait to see you finally reunited. ... Justice has prevailed and today, an innocent man is free."



Kara-Murza, 42, is an activist and dissident with dual Russian-British citizenship who has been a persistent campaigner against President Vladimir Putin's rule and was given a record 25-year prison sentence in April last year on treason and other charges for criticizing Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Kurmasheva is a [journalist](#) with Radio Free Europe and RL's Tatar-Bashkir Service who was arrested in October 2023 in Kazan, Russia and accused of failing to register as a foreign agent. She was convicted earlier this month in a secret trial of "spreading false information" and sentenced to six and a half years in prison, according to Radio Free Europe.

The prisoner swap involves the release of 16 individuals previously detained in Russia in exchange for eight individuals held in the U.S., Germany, Norway, Slovenia and Poland.

U.S. Rep. Elissa Slotkin, D-Holly, released a statement that said, in part: "Today's happy news is also a reminder that we face a dangerous and unprincipled adversary in Vladimir Putin. He uses innocent Americans as pawns. Those who want to cozy up to him, or simply turn a blind eye to his demands in Ukraine, would do well to remember the suffering of Paul, the Whelan family, and the millions of Ukrainians living with the consequences of Putin's actions."

### **What led to Paul Whelan's arrest**

Whelan, 54, lived in Novi before he was arrested Dec. 28, 2018, in his room at Moscow's upscale Metropol Hotel.

The Russian Foreign Ministry alleged that Whelan was caught in an act of espionage with a USB drive that contained classified information. Whelan insisted he was set up, and simply was a tourist in Moscow to attend the wedding of a friend.

"Russia says it caught James Bond on a spy mission. In reality, they abducted Mr. Bean on holiday," Whelan told journalists during a detention hearing at Moscow City Court in October 2019.

For more than a year, Whelan awaited trial at Lefortovo prison in Moscow, notorious for its poor conditions. Initially, he was denied such staples as toilet paper and soap. He said guards threatened, abused, and harassed him.

He also wasn't allowed to make calls home to his parents, Edward and Rosemary Whelan, who live in Manchester, Michigan. His mail was censored, and visits from his lawyers and embassy representatives were extremely limited.

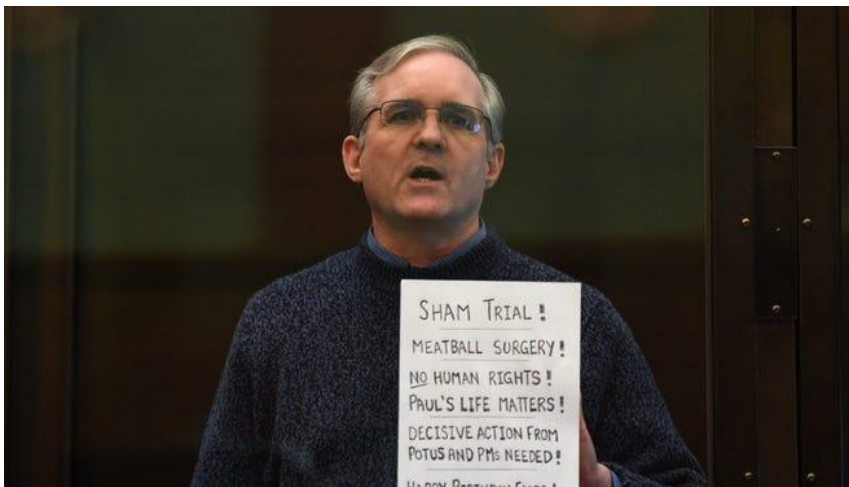
"This is typical prisoner-of-war isolation technique," Whelan told journalists at a court hearing in May 2019. "They're trying to run me down so that I will talk to them."



His health suffered. He lost weight. An inguinal hernia that was a nuisance before his trip to Russia became a pressing concern. An ambulance was called during one of Whelan's court hearings, and he underwent emergency hernia repair surgery in May 2020.

When his trial finally came a month later, proceedings took place behind closed doors. Whelan, who is a former Marine and worked as head of global security for auto supplier BorgWarner, was swiftly convicted.

John Sullivan, then-U.S. ambassador in Moscow, described the conviction a "mockery of justice."



### **'A crime has been committed against him'**

"Paul was given a horrific sentence of 16 years for a crime he did not commit," his sister, Elizabeth Whelan, told the UN Security Council in late April 2023.

Whelan was taken to IK-17, a labor camp in the Russian province of Mordovia, about an eight-hour drive southeast of Moscow. For nearly three years, he has spent most of his days in the camp sewing buttonholes and cutting threads from prison uniforms, "held as a pawn and victim of Russia's descent into lawlessness," Elizabeth Whelan said.

"Paul has not committed a crime, but a crime has been committed against him."

And Whelan has watched, painfully, as other Americans arrested in Russia during his years of incarceration won their freedom.

First was Trevor Reed, a former Marine arrested in August 2019 — eight months after Whelan. Reed was accused of assaulting a police officer after a night of heavy drinking in Moscow. He was released in April 2022 [during a prisoner swap](#) with the U.S. government, which was holding convicted Russian drug trafficker Konstantin Yaroshenko.

When Reed was freed but Whelan was left behind, his brother David Whelan said: “Is President (Joe) Biden's failure to bring Paul home an admission that some cases are too hard to solve? Is the administration's piecemeal approach picking low-hanging fruit? And how does a family know that their loved one's case is too difficult, a hostage too far out of reach?”

Then came the release of Brittney Griner, a WNBA superstar arrested in February 2022 at an airport near Moscow, after authorities said she tried to enter the country with vape cartridges containing cannabis oil. The U.S. government declared Griner wrongly detained. Still, she was convicted and sentenced to nine years in a Russian labor camp.

Yet 10 months after her arrest, [Griner was freed in an exchange](#) for convicted Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout, known as the Merchant of Death for his role in a conspiracy to kill Americans and aid a terrorist organization.

For a second time, U.S. government negotiations with Russia to bring American citizens home left Whelan behind.

“Brittney is free,” David Whelan said. “And Paul is still a hostage.”

Then, in March of 2023, [Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich](#) was arrested while on assignment in Yekaterinburg. He was accused of collecting secrets for the U.S. government about a Russian military complex, according to the [Russian news agency Tass](#).

Gershkovich denied the charges, as did his employer and top Biden administration officials, who swiftly declared him wrongfully detained. He was convicted last month and sentenced to 16 years, the first time since the Cold War that Russia had put a US reporter on trial for espionage.

Whelan's family expressed consternation that yet another American could be charged in Russia, convicted and released before Paul Whelan.

“Paul told our parents he feels as though the U.S. government has abandoned him,” David Whelan said.

“We understand completely how he feels. We have heard that there is lobbying to encourage the White House and State Department to divert resources, currently applied to Paul's case, away from it. We don't have the ability to substantiate (that), but it gibes with our concern that ... the U.S. government might consider making a decision that leaves Paul in Russia.”

Finally, now, it's Whelan's turn.

His sister is eager to see how much his ongoing incarceration has changed him.

“I no longer know what my brother looks like,” she said in April 2023 at the UN Security Council Stakeout on Russia's Wrongful Detention Practices. “The images that we see on television and

in the news? That's Paul Whelan in the life he was living before he was taken captive. No one has been allowed to take a photo of him since his trial almost three years ago.

"Paul was a corporate security director. He had a job he loved, a home, a life of hope and opportunity. All that has been taken away from him by Russia, a country that revels in its culture of lies, its tradition of hostage diplomacy."

She said Russia has made it a practice to arbitrarily arrest U.S. citizens for concessions.

"It is the action of a terrorist state," Elizabeth Whelan said.

"First my brother Paul Whelan, then Trevor Reed, both tourists. The sports star Brittney Griner. And now the journalist Evan Gershkovich.

"And who will be their next victim? It doesn't take a stretch of the imagination to see that Russia will continue to push the boundaries."

*Free Press reporter Todd Spangler, USA Today and Bloomberg News contributed to this story.*

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