

LOCAL NEWS



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Timeline: Michigan man Paul Whelan released from Russian prison after more than 5 years

Massive prisoner swap frees 12 people



Paul Whelan

Michigan man Paul Whelan has been released from Russian prison after spending more than five years in custody.

Paul Whelan was freed as part of a massive prisoner swap that freed two dozen people, according to the White House.

Until now, Paul Whelan had been left out of other high-profile prisoner swaps involving Russia.

In April 2022, Marine veteran [Trevor Reed](#) was released and in December 2022, WNBA star [Brittney Griner](#) was released.

Here's a look at the timeline of events from his arrest to his release:

December 2018

In December 2019, Paul Whelan was detained in Russia. His brother, David Whelan, told MSNBC that Paul Whelan was part of a wedding party. The friend who was getting married had asked him to lead tours around the area because he hadn't been to Russia before.

"He loves to travel so I wasn't at all surprised that he would be confident going to Russia. He has a law enforcement background, he's got his Marine background, he does corporate security and he's aware of the risks of traveling in certain parts of the world," David Whelan told [MSNBC](#).

According to the report, Whelan had been in Russia for a day or two when he stopped contacting his family in the U.S. and missed the wedding. The family learned he had been detained from online news reports.

January 2019

In January 2019, Paul Whelan was [formally charged with spying](#) by Russian investigative agencies. Paul Whelan's family and Russian friends insisted that he is not a spy.

February 2020

In February 2020, David Whelan [spoke to Local 4](#) about his brother. He said he was grateful that the new U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan visited Paul in Prison.

“Paul’s case had gone on far too long, shielded in secrecy and hidden from view, and there is nothing fair or transparent about it,” Sullivan said.

Whelan reportedly had a hernia. His brother said that the injury had gone untreated and Russians were using a language barrier to keep Paul Whelan in the dark.

“He doesn’t know,” David Whelan said. “The FSB won’t allow him to speak to an English-speaking physician to get information about what his problem is and both the prison and FSB -- they’re blocking any sharing of medical records.”

June 2020

In June 2020, Paul Whelan was convicted and sentenced to 16 years in Russian prison for espionage by a court in Moscow. Paul Whelan and his family have maintained his innocence.

February 2021

In February 2021, Whelan’s family [had an hour-long Zoom call](#) with at least 80 people in the State Department.

Those on the call heard about a new law passed in December -- The Levinson Act -- that gives the federal government more tools to implement sanctions to give nations holding American citizens under suspicious circumstances reasons to release them.

July 2022

President Joe Biden spoke to Paul Whelan's family in July 2022. David Whelan told [Local 4 News](#) that the phone call from the president came after a week full of emotions.

“We do have a certain amount of communication at lower levels of the state department about Paul's case, obviously, we speak to the embassy on a regular basis to make sure that he's actually healthy and well. But when you have the president call, it's obviously a huge honor to have the president speak to you and to reassure you about your loved one's case,” said David Whelan. “I think it's symbolic. I don't actually think that a presidential call means anything in the sense of it doesn't mean that something's about to happen. It doesn't mean that progress has been made that wasn't going to be made otherwise.”

---> **Watch:** [New hope for Paul Whelan to return home as government officials step in](#)

December 2022

In December 2022, David Whelan [said he had been in contact with his brother](#) after being unable to reach him since November.

“Paul (Whelan) has been able to clarify in calls with our parents what happened,” David Whelan said. “It seems as though the prison committed an own goal, bringing a lot of attention to Paul's whereabouts for no reason.”

On Dec. 8, 2022, [Brittney Griner was freed from Russia](#) in a high-level prisoner swap. That swap did not include Paul Whelan.

Whelan's brother David said in a statement to the Associated Press he was "so glad" for Griner's release but also disappointed for his family. He credited the White House with giving the Whelan family advance notice and said he did not fault officials for making the deal.

---> Read: [Trump did not care about freeing Michigan native Paul Whelan from Russian jail during his presidency, brother says](#)

April 2023

In April 2023, [Paul Whelan told his parents he felt as though the U.S. government had abandoned him](#). His feeling of abandonment came months after the high-profile prisoner swap that brought WNBA star Britney Griner home.

August 2023

In August 2023, Russian state-funded media Russia Today was released that showed the [first footage of Paul Whelan since 2020](#).

David Whelan said the video showcases the strength, determination and contempt of his brother, where earlier he was worried Paul was losing hope.

---> [Paul Whelan speaks with US Secretary of State about release from Russian prison camp](#)

November 2023

In November 2023, [Paul Whelan said he was assaulted by a prisoner while working a sewing table in a Russian labor camp](#). Whelan said he was concerned that more attacks would

occur at any time due to the various sharp implements in the workshop, which include various sharp tools in the workshop like a shear that the other prisoner held during the attack.

---> ['We ain't giving up': President Biden holds out hope that hostage from Novi will return home](#)

December 2023

Dec. 28, 2023, [marked five years in Russian custody](#) for Paul Whelan. Earlier in the month, Russian President Vladimir Putin was asked about Whelan and the Russian president said he would like to make a deal with the United States.

At the time, David Whelan said he believed the U.S. had made offers to the Russian government to get his brother home, but that Russia had rejected the offers so far.

May 2024

In May 2024, [Paul Whelan expressed concerns to CNN](#) that the arrest of another American in Russia could hurt his chances of being freed.

“Unfortunately, if this gentleman is declared wrongfully detained, it will sort of start negotiations for Evan and I all over again because then there’ll be the three of us,” Paul Whelan said. “This is one of the problems that we’ve had in the past. They were negotiating for me, and then it was Trevor and me, and then it was Brittney (Griner) and me. And now it’s Evan and me. And every time they’ve negotiated, it’s always been starting fresh when there’s another person involved. So yeah, it is a bit of a concern.”

August 2024

On Aug. 1, 2024, [the United States and Russia completed their biggest prisoner swap](#) in post-Soviet history. Moscow released Paul Whelan, journalist Evan Gershkovich, and 20 other people.

---> [Read: US and Russia complete biggest prisoner swap in post-Soviet history, freeing Gershkovich and Whelan](#)

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Kayla is a Web Producer for ClickOnDetroit. Before she joined the team in 2018 she worked at WILX in Lansing as a digital producer.