
US-Russia prisoner exchange. Von der Leyen: “I welcome the release of innocent citizens and upright democrats.” The relief of the European Union

“The European Union is relieved by the release and transfer to freedom outside Russia and Belarus of a number of political prisoners, including EU citizens, facilitated with the help of Turkey.” The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, **Josep Borrell**, wrote this in a statement issued as the political prisoners boarded the plane from Ankara that brought them back to freedom overnight. “The released activists, human rights defenders and journalists have been unjustly persecuted and imprisoned by the Russian and Belarusian regimes for political reasons and held in unacceptable conditions,” Borrell added. **A total of sixteen prisoners were released from prisons in Russia and Belarus.** Among them were Evan Gershkovich, a Wall Street Journal reporter who had been sentenced to 16 years in prison on espionage charges in July; Paul Whelan, a former US Marine who had been imprisoned since 2018; Oleg Orlov, a peace activist and co-chairman of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize-awarded human rights group Memorial; Lilia Tchanycheva and Ksenia Fadeyeva, Ilya Yashin and Vadim Ostanin, opposition activists linked to the figure of Alexei Navalny; Vladimir Kara-Mourza, a dual Russian-British citizen who was incarcerated for 25 years on charges of “high treason” and of “spreading false information” about the conflict in Ukraine; Alexandra Skotchilenko, convicted of seven years' imprisonment for having replaced supermarket price tags with messages denouncing the Russian attack on Ukraine; Alsu Kurmasheva, a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist with dual Russian-USA citizenship; opposition activist Andrei Pivovarov. Under the deal, Russia released also political scientist Dieter Voronin, a dual Russian-German citizen as are also 19-year-old Kevin Lick, sentenced to four years' imprisonment in 2023 on charges of 'high treason', and attorney Herman Moijes. Also released was German national Patrick Schobel, arrested in January on charges of drug trafficking; and German military doctor Rico Krieger, sentenced to death in Belarus on “terrorism” charges. “Political prisoners and all those still unjustly detained in Russian and Belarusian prisons must be immediately and unconditionally released”, Borrell concludes in his statement. In a message on X, the President of the European Commission, **Ursula von der Leyen**, expressed her satisfaction with the developments:

“This is a moment of great joy for all who have fought for their freedom,” she wrote,

welcoming “the release of innocent citizens from EU and the USA and upright Russian democrats held captive in Russia”, the president wrote. “The Kremlin swapped them for convicted criminals and murderers. This shows the stark difference”, she added. The list of released prisoners detained in the West includes six alleged Russian secret service agents and spies, such as Vadim Krassikov, sentenced to life imprisonment in Berlin in 2021 for the murder of a Georgian from the Chechen minority, the Russian spy couple Artiom Doultshev and Anna Doultsheva, arrested in Slovenia in late 2022 and now returning to Russia with their two sons; Pavel Roubtsov, arrested by the Polish secret service in February 2022; Mikhail Mikushin, arrested in Norway in October 2022; and hacker Roman Seleznev, sentenced in 2017 to 27 years in prison for credit card fraud. The President of the European Parliament, **Roberta Metsola**, also posted a message expressing her satisfaction with the “long overdue release of Evan Gershkovich, Alsu Kurmasheva and other dissidents and journalists illegally detained by Russia.” For Metsola,

“their freedom should never have been threatened.”

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