



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Gershkovich will not stay in prison for long, the Kremlin does not want that



Evan Gershkovich is unlikely to spend the next 16 years in a Russian prison, which is what a court in Yekaterinburg sentenced him to on Friday.

That would be an undesirable outcome for Russia, because the arrest of The Wall Street Journal reporter 16 months ago and the subsequent espionage trial were not about Gershkovich actually spending a long time in prison.

The accusation that Gershkovich was not in Russia as a journalist but as a CIA agent and engaged in espionage seemed more like a political task before the court in Yekaterinburg than a serious task for the public prosecutor's office.

Gershkovich was a victim of a state-performed kidnapping, one of the cruel methods typical of the Russian state, the tradition of which goes back to the time of the USSR.

By its standards, the Russian leadership has quite openly expressed its willingness to exchange Evan Gershkovich for a prisoner in the West, in whose return Moscow is interested.

"The special services are in contact with one another. I believe an agreement can be reached," said Putin in an interview with Tucker Carlson last February, explaining his belief that a deal could be reached for the exchange of Evan Gershkovich.

This message appeared to be a key factor in Putin's decision to agree to an interview with a controversial American journalist.

Negotiations are still ongoing

The head of Russian diplomacy, Sergei Lavrov, **confirmed** just a few days ago at UN headquarters that the confidential negotiations were still "ongoing," and not just in February.

He said this before the sentencing of Gershkovich in Yekaterinburg, surely with the

principal goal of reminding the American public that the Kremlin has not given up on the idea of exchanging prisoners.

Sergei Lavrov knows well that the judiciary in Russia is merely an outpost of the political leadership

At the same time, the first Russian diplomat emphasised that the frequent coverage of the exchange in the US media "isn't helping" Gershkovich, as it is important to await the verdict first.

Of course, Lavrov's appeal not to talk about the exchange is based on the fact that Russia is a constitutional state, and one cannot talk about the outcome of the trial in advance.

However, he himself knows well that this is not the case and that the judiciary is merely an outpost of the political leadership. Therefore, he only brought up the Gershkovich case during his stay in the USA to revisit the prisoner exchange topic.

Political profit from kidnappings

In the complex area of prisoner exchange, Russia appears to be the most interested actor. For Russia, the exchange appears to be the final act of the operation that it creates and from which it always expects multiple gains.

The biggest gain represents the establishment of a sense of superiority over the enemy, long regarded as the ultimate adversary in the Russian domestic political narrative.

The Kremlin's frequent offers to exchange American citizens as an act of mercy towards the USA convey the idea that Russia is superior given that it offers and grants "mercy."

The goal is also to inflict political damage on the US leadership for putting itself in a position to compromise on some basic values, specifically choosing between rescuing an American citizen and negotiating with

kidnappers.



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The possibility of "overruling" verdicts passed in a democratic and fair process always exists, and those who accept the exchange of prisoners simultaneously violate their nation's legal system.

US President Joe Biden has long been fully aware of these political risks. "As I have told Evan's parents, I will never give up hope either. We will continue working every day to secure his release," **said** President Biden last March on the anniversary of The Wall Street Journal reporter's arrest.

In the last exchange, which saw the release of basketball player and Olympic champion Brittney Griner from a Russian prison, Biden did relatively well politically. The same dilemmas that Washington faces today in the event of a possible Gershkovich exchange existed until December 2022, when Brittney Griner returned home from a Russian prison.

But back then, Biden was only halfway through his presidential term, at a time when it was possible to take more risks than today, when there are just over three months to go until the election and Biden's candidacy itself is no longer so certain.

Trump's promise

Moscow may be reckoning that Biden's

campaign urgently needs a big, if risky, statesmanlike move to close the gap on Donald Trump. In this respect, the exchange of Evan Gershkovich stands out as a solution that will certainly be considered.

However, Donald Trump has already pledged to use his "influence" on Vladimir Putin and that Gershkovich would be free "almost immediately" following the elections on November 5, which he expects to win.

If Trump's announced scenario—in which he claims the USA "will be paying nothing"—comes to pass, it's likely a gift from the Russian leader in recognition of his political favourite's return to the White House

"Evan Gershkovich, the Reporter from The Wall Street Journal, who is being held by Russia, will be released almost immediately after the Election, but definitely before I assume Office. He will be HOME, SAFE, AND WITH HIS FAMILY," **wrote** Trump at the end of May on his social platform, Truth.

If Trump's announced scenario—in which he claims the USA "will be paying nothing"—comes to pass, it's likely a gift from the Russian leader in recognition of his political favourite's return to the White House.

However, even this result will not mark the end of Moscow's dark strategy of arresting a US citizen from time to time in order to use that case to exert political influence on the Washington administration.