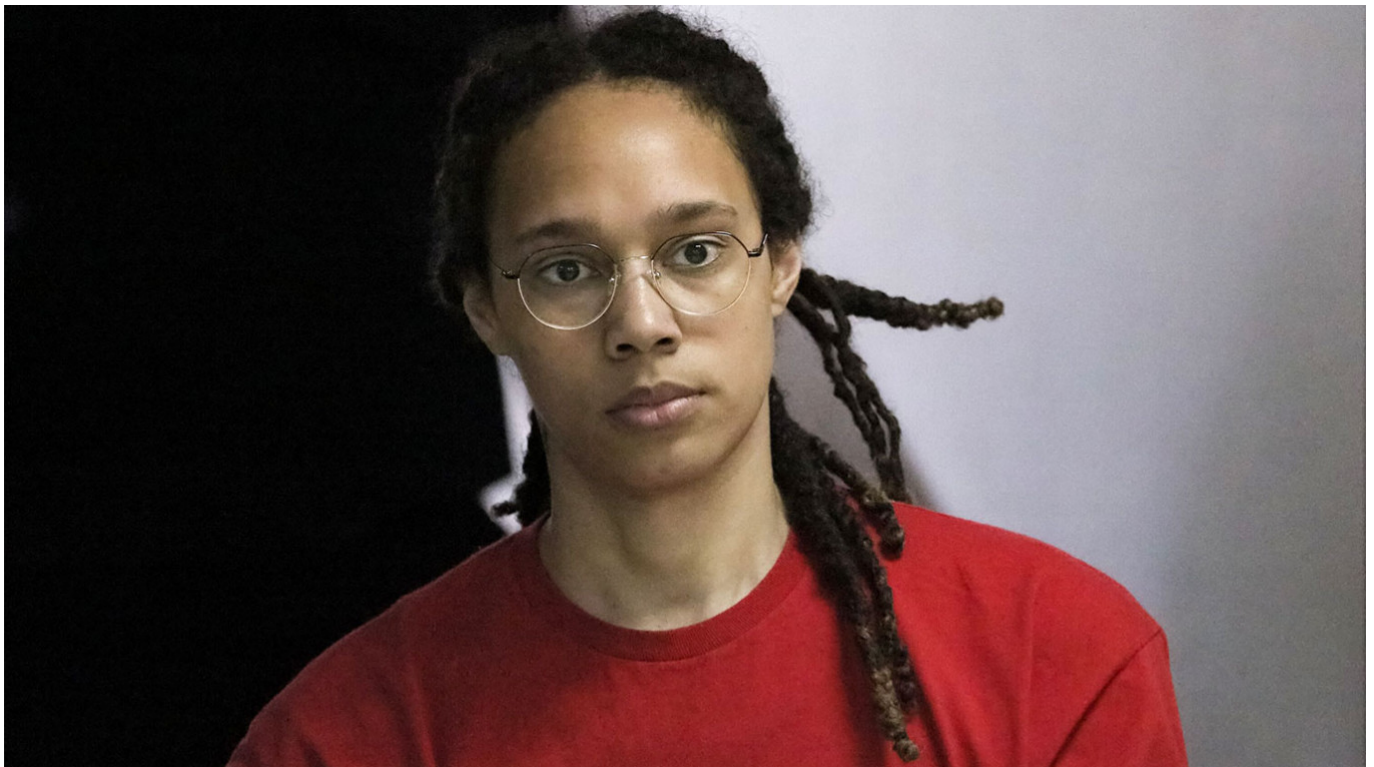


# Russian Team Praises U.S. Basketball Star Griner in Court

By [AFP](#)

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U.S. basketball star Brittney Griner. **Sophia Sandurskaya / Moskva News Agency**

U.S. basketball star Brittney Griner's Russian team praised her contribution to the country's sport on Thursday as they shared testimony during her high-profile trial.

Griner, a two-time Olympic basketball gold medalist and WNBA champion who had played in Russia, was detained in February, just days before Moscow launched its offensive in Ukraine.

The 31-year-old was charged with drug smuggling for possessing vape cartridges with cannabis oil.

Last week, she pleaded guilty and now faces up to 10 years in a Russian prison.

**Related article:** [U.S. Basketball Star Brittney Griner Pleads Guilty to Russian Drug Charges](#)

Griner was detained while returning to play basketball for UMMC Yekaterinburg, a team in the Russian Premier League.

"It's the first time we saw our basketball player. She looks good," Maxim Ryabkov, UMMC Yekaterinburg director, told reporters in the town of Khimki outside Moscow where the trial is being held.

"Our aim was to show what a big role she played in the club, in Russian basketball in general."

Captain Yevgenia Belyakova said: "We very much miss her, her energy."

Belyakova said she wanted to "stand by her in these moments" and hoped that the "case will be over."

Maria Blagovolina, a member of the player's defense team, said Ryabkov had told the court about Griner's "outstanding abilities" and that thanks to her the Russian team had been very successful in recent years.

Griner, who is 2.06 meters tall, is considered one of the world's best basketball players.

## **Talk of swap**

Griner's case has been enmeshed in the freeze in U.S.-Russia relations since President Vladimir Putin sent troops into Western-backed Ukraine on February 24.

U.S. President Joe Biden was accused of ignoring her plight until he spoke on the phone with Griner's wife last week.

The U.S. leader also wrote a letter to the WNBA star, after she had sent him a hand-written message asking Biden to secure her release.

After Griner's conviction, former U.S. ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul urged the Biden administration to exchange imprisoned Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout for Griner and Paul Whelan, who was convicted of espionage in 2020 and sentenced to 16 years in prison.

A swap "might be the only way to get Brittney Griner out as soon as possible," he said.

On Thursday, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said it was premature to discuss Griner's possible swap in the middle of her trial.

"As if they don't understand and don't know this," she told reporters, referring to U.S. statements.

She said U.S. authorities should not be trying to put pressure on Moscow and instead must focus their efforts on "practical work through established channels."

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