

Biden, Harris Greet U.S. Prisoners Released in Huge Swap With Russia

By [Danny Kemp and Brendan Smialowski for AFP](#)

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Manuel Balce Ceneta / AP / TASS

President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris greeted journalist Evan Gershkovich and two other Americans Thursday as they arrived back on U.S. soil after being freed by Russia in a huge prisoner swap.

Biden and Harris, who is the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee after the president dropped out of the 2024 election, were at Joint Base Andrews near Washington to welcome back the freed prisoners at around 11:40 p.m.

Wall Street Journal reporter Gershkovich, former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan, and journalist Alsu Kurmasheva were greeted by cheers from family and friends as they disembarked a plane, before each embracing Biden and Harris.

They were among two dozen prisoners released earlier Thursday in the biggest East-West

prisoner swap since the Cold War.

Embed:

President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris greet Evan Gershkovich
pic.twitter.com/xqiqGE4GUh

— Acyn (@Acyn) [August 2, 2024](#)

A fourth freed prisoner, Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian Kremlin critic with U.S. residency, was also among those freed but was returning separately to the United States.

In total 10 Russians, including two minors, were exchanged for 16 Westerners and Russians imprisoned in Russia in a dramatic exchange on the airport tarmac in Turkey's capital Ankara.

"Their brutal ordeal is over," Biden told a news conference at the White House earlier, flanked by the overjoyed families of the freed prisoners.

Harris earlier welcomed their release after an "appalling perversion of justice."

Historic swap

The most high-profile prisoner was Gershkovich, 32, who was detained in Russia in March 2023 on a reporting trip and sentenced in July to 16 years in prison on spying charges that were denounced by the U.S.

Gershkovich's family said in a statement that they had "waited 491 days for Evan's release."

"We can't wait to give him the biggest hug and see his sweet and brave smile up close," they said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had earlier given his own hero's welcome to the freed prisoners from his country, in a mirror image of the ceremony that would unfold in the U.S.

They included Vadim Krasikov, a Russian intelligence agent imprisoned in Germany for assassinating a former Chechen rebel.

"I want to congratulate you on your return to the motherland," Putin said.

The historic swap happened after months of top-secret negotiations and involved Russian prisoners freed from Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Norway and the U.S., and on the other side from Russia and Belarus.

'Brave and bold'

Biden hailed the U.S. allies for making "brave and bold decisions" to release Russians held for

murder, espionage and other crimes in order to free the Americans and Russian dissidents.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the swap was "difficult" but had "saved lives."

Berlin agreed to take a total of 12 detainees, including five with German nationality.

Scholz described a "moving" encounter with the prisoners after greeting them at Cologne airport, adding: "Many feared for their health and even their lives."

Among them is Rico Krieger, a German who was sentenced to death in Belarus on espionage charges before a reprieve this week.

Speculation about a deal had swirled for days after several detainees had disappeared from the prison system, but there was no confirmation until they finally switched planes in Ankara.

"We held our breath and crossed our fingers," U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said.

The exchange was the first between Russia and the West since star US basketball player Brittney Griner returned home in return for Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout in December 2022.

It was the biggest since 2010, when 14 alleged spies were exchanged. They included double agent Sergei Skripal, who was sent by Moscow to Britain and undercover Russian agent Anna Chapman, sent by Washington to Russia.

Before then, major swaps involving more than a dozen people had only taken place during the Cold War, with Soviet and Western powers carrying out exchanges in 1985 and 1986.

The White House revealed that an even more ambitious agreement had been on the cards with attempts to negotiate the release of Putin opponent Alexei Navalny, before he died in February this year.

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