

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks on the Release of Three United States Citizens and One Permanent Resident From Detention in Russia and an Exchange With Reporters

August 1, 2024

[The President entered the room with family members of those released from detention and, as he approached the podium, briefly addressed them before beginning his remarks.]

The President. Your markers are here.

Hello, everyone.

We've got everybody?

Well, good afternoon. And this is a very good afternoon—a very good afternoon.

Today we're bringing home Paul, Evan, Alsu, and Vladimir, three American citizens and one American green-card holder.

All four have been imprisoned unjustly in Russia: Paul for nearly 6 years, Vladimir since 2022, Evan since March of 2023, and Alsu since October of 2023. Russian authorities arrested them, convicted them in show trials, and sentenced them to long prison terms with absolutely no legitimate reason whatsoever. None.

Paul, a former marine, who was in Russia for a wedding. Evan, a journalist, with the Russian—in Russia—was a—was in Russia assigned by the Wall Street Journal. Alsu, also a journalist, was in Russia to see family. All three falsely accused of being spies.

And Vladimir, who is a Russian citizen by birth and holds an American green card, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and was a pallbearer at my friend John McCain's funeral with me. He spoke out against Putin's regime, and for that he was convicted of treason.

And now their brutal ordeal is over, and they're free. Moments ago, the families and I were able to speak to them on the telephone from the Oval Office. They're out of Russia. Earlier today they were flown to Turkey. And soon, they'll be wheels up on their way home to see their families.

This is an incredible relief for all the family members gathered here. And it's a relief to the friends and colleagues all across the country who've been praying for this day for a long time.

The deal that made this possible was a feat of diplomacy and friendship—friendship. Multiple countries helped get this done. They joined a difficult, complex negotiations at my request. And I personally thank them all again. And I've thanked them personally, and I'll thank them again.

All told, Russia has released 16 prisoners. Eight Russians who were being held in the West will be sent home as well. These 16 prisoners from Russia have—that Russia has released include 4 Americans, 5 Germans, 7 Russian citizens who were political prisoners in their own country.

One of those Russians runs a human rights organization, Memorial, which won a Nobel Prize in 2022. Putin threw him in prison for voicing opposition to the war in Ukraine. Four others worked with Alexei Navalny, the political opposition leader who died in Russian prison this year. Now they can live safely abroad and continue their work of advocating for democracy if they so choose.

This deal would not have been made possible without our allies Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Norway, and Turkey. They all stepped up, and they stood with us. They stood with us, and they made bold and brave decisions, released prisoners being held in their countries who were justifiably being held, and provided logistical support to get the Americans home.

So, for anyone who questions whether allies matter, they do. They matter. And today is a powerful example of why it's vital to have friends in this world, friends you can trust, work with, and depend upon, especially on matters of great consequence and sensitivity like this. Our alliances make our people safer, and we began to see that again today.

Let me say this. It says a lot about the United States that we work relentlessly to free Americans who are unjustly held around the world. It also says a lot about us that this deal includes the release of Russian political prisoners.

They stood up for democracy and human rights. Their own leaders threw them in prison. The United States helped secure their release as well. That's who we are in the United States.

We stand for freedom, for liberty, for justice, not only for our own people, but for others as well. And that's why all Americans can take pride in what we've achieved today.

I want to thank everyone in my administration who helped make this happen. Our work did not start just on day one. It started before day one.

During the transition, I instructed our national security team to dig into all the cases of hostages being wrongfully detained, which were inherently—well, we inherit them from the prior administration. I wanted to make sure we'd hit the ground running, and we did.

As of today, my administration has brought home over 70 Americans who were wrongfully detained and held hostage abroad, many since before I took office.

Additionally, I issued an Executive order in 2022 authorizing penalties like sanctions and travel bans on those who hold Americans against their will. And my State Department has introduced new warnings for Americans about the risk of being wrongfully detained by a foreign government.

Deals like this one come with tough calls, and there are never any guarantees. But there's nothing that matters more to me than protecting Americans at home and abroad. And so we'll continue to work for the release of all wrongfully detained Americans around the world.

Let me end where I began, with Paul, Evan, and Alsu, Vladimir, and their families. They never gave up hope. We can't imagine what they've been through—all of you. Matter of fact, this lady right here, I think, was living in the Oval Office with us for a while.

But all kidding aside, I can't imagine their joy right now. They're home.

Tomorrow is a big day—the 13th birthday of Miriam. Miriam, where are you? Come here.

You all know we have a tradition in the Biden family. We sing "Happy Birthday" on any birthday. You ready? All of you.

[At this point, the President led the audience in singing "Happy Birthday" to Miriam Butorin, daughter of Ms. Kurmasheva.]

And remember, no serious guys until you're 30. *[Laughter]* God love you. She's Alsu's daughter. Now she gets to celebrate with her mom.

That's what this is all about: Families able to be together again, like they should have been all along. So I want to thank you again, to everyone who did their part. In just a few hours, we'll welcome home our fellow Americans.

We're looking forward to that. God willing, we're going to be out at Andrews and get that done.

So thank you, thank you, thank you. And this is a good day.

The President's Conversation With the Released U.S. Citizens

Q. What did you say to them on the phone, sir? What did you say when they answered the phone on the other side?

The President. I said, "Welcome almost home." [Laughter]

[Several reporters began asking questions at once.]

Q. Mr. President, how do you keep other—how do you keep countries—these so-called abductor states—from simply taking more Americans in order to get more of their prisoners home? How do you end these perverse incentives, sir?

Overseas Travel Advisories for U.S. Citizens

The President. By advising people not to go certain places, telling them what's at risk and what's at stake.

The President's Diplomatic Outreach in Negotiating the Prisoner Exchange

Q. Mr. President, was there a turning point in these negotiations? And can you speak to the complexity of working with six countries to secure these releases?

The President. Well, look, I'm not going to take the time now, but I'll do this later in the week.

I particularly owe a great sense of gratitude to the Chancellor. The demands they were making of me required me to get some significant concessions from Germany, which they originally concluded they could not do because of the person in question.

But everybody stepped up. Poland stepped up. Slovenia stepped up. Turkey stepped up. And it matters to have relationships. It really does. These things matter.

Q. Did you——

Russia

Q. Could this improve relations with Russia, Mr. President?

The President. Pardon me?

Q. Could this improve relations with Russia? Is there any avenue for that after this prisoner exchange deal?

The President. As my sister might say, "Your lips to God's ears, man." I——

[Several reporters began speaking at once.]

Q. Mr. President, did you speak to——

President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia

Q. Did you ever speak directly with Vladimir Putin about this? Or would you be willing to speak with Putin, now, directly?

The President. I don't need to speak with Putin.

[Several reporters spoke at once.]

The President. Anyway——

Negotiated Prisoner Exchange

Q. [*Inaudible*] What—how did you weigh that decision of letting somebody out who, sounds like, got away with murder now?

The President. I got home innocent people. Thank you.

[*Several reporters spoke at once.*]

All right. Thanks, everybody.

Q. Mr. President——

Q. As a father, how do you feel about this?

The President's Diplomatic Outreach in Negotiating the Prisoner Exchange

Q. Are you speaking with Erdogan or any of the leaders about this?

The President. Say that again?

Q. Are you speaking with President Erdogan or other leaders about this?

The President. Yes, I've spoken with all the leaders about this.

Q. What did you say to——

The President's View on the Importance of Family

The President. And by the way, as a father—look, you heard me say this before, and I mean it. My dad had a simple proposition: Family is the beginning, the middle, and the end. Blood of my blood and bone of my bone.

I could think of nothing more consequential. I mean that sincerely. And having lost family, not—in a different way and not knowing what's happening to their circumstance when they're accidental, would it help—it matters. It matters. [*Inaudible*]

Q. Mr. President, what did Germany ask for in response for their cooperation?

The President. Nothing.

Q. President Biden——

Q. What did Chancellor Scholz say to you?

Release of U.S. Citizens and Permanent Resident From Russian Detention

Q. President Trump has said repeatedly that he could have gotten the hostages out without giving anything in exchange. What do you say to that? What do you say to President Trump—now former President Trump?

The President. Why didn't he do it when he was President?

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:18 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Paul N. Whelan, a U.S. citizen who was arrested and held on espionage charges by Russian security services in Moscow, Russia, on December 28, 2018; Evan Gershkovich, a Wall Street Journal reporter who was arrested by Russian authorities on March 29, 2023; Alsu Kurmasheva, a journalist with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Tatar-Bashkir Service who was detained in Kazan, Russia, on October 18, 2023; Vladimir Kara-Murza, a British-Russian journalist and contributor to the Washington Post who was arrested by Russian authorities in April 2022 on charges of spreading false information about the armed forces; Oleg

Orlov, cochairman of the Memorial human rights organization, who was imprisoned in February for his criticism of Russia's military campaign in Ukraine; Lilia Chanyшева, Ksenia Fadeyeva, Ilya Yashin, and Vadim Ostanin, associates of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny who died in a Russian prison on February 16; Elizabeth Whelan, sister of Paul N. Whelan; Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany; and Vadim Krasikov, a Russian intelligence operative who was convicted in Germany in 2021 and sentenced to life in prison for killing a former Chechen rebel in a Berlin park in 2019. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens. A reporter referred to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Release of U.S. citizens and permanent resident from detention in Russia; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters, White House.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden Owens, Valerie; Butorin, Miriam; Chanyшева, Lilia; Fadeyeva, Kseni; Gershkovich, Evan; Kara-Murza, Vladimir; Krasikov, Vadim; Kurmasheva, Alsu; Orlov, Oleg; Ostanin, Vadim; Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich; Scholz, Olaf; Trump, Donald J.; Whelan, Elizabeth; Whelan, Paul N.; Yashin, Ilya.

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