US reporter held by Russia on spying charges denied release

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By The Associated Press

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A Russian judge ruled Tuesday that American journalist Evan Gershkovich must remain behind bars on espionage charges in a case that is part of a crackdown the Kremlin has intensified on dissent and press freedom since invading Ukraine.

Appearing in public for the first time in weeks, the 31-year-old Wall Street Journal reporter stood in a defendant’s glass cage in Moscow City Court, wearing blue jeans and a navy blue gingham checked shirt. He paced at times with his arms folded, talking through an opening with his lawyers and occasionally smiling as he acknowledged the other journalists crammed into the courtroom for photos before the hearing was closed because Russian authorities have declared the case secret.

Gershkovich is the first U.S. correspondent since the Cold War to be detained in Russia on spying charges, and his arrest rattled journalists in the country and drew outrage in the West. Gershkovich, his employer and the U.S. government deny he was involved in spying and have demanded his release.

“Evan is a member of the free press who right up until he was arrested was engaged in newsgathering. Any suggestions otherwise are false,” the Journal has said. Last week, the U.S. officially declared that Gershkovich was “wrongfully detained.”

Russia’s Federal Security Service arrested Gershkovich in the Ural Mountains city of Yekaterinburg on March 29 and accused him of trying to obtain classified information about a Russian arms factory.

In rejecting Gershkovich’s appeal to be released from pretrial detention, the judge ruled he must remain in jail until at least May 29. The journalist’s lawyers said they petitioned for house arrest or for his release on bail of 50 million rubles (about $610,000), but were rejected. The lawyers said they plan to appeal the ruling, which the Journal and its publisher, Dow Jones, called “disappointing.”

Russian journalist Vasily Polonsky posted a video in which he shouts, “Evan, hang in there. Everyone says hello!” Gershkovich then nods.

Gershkovich could face up to 20 years in prison if convicted. Russian lawyers have said past espionage investigations took a year to 18 months, during which time he could have little contact with the outside world.

He is held in Moscow’s Lefortovo prison, which dates from the czarist era and has been a terrifying symbol of repression since Soviet times, especially under Josef Stalin.

“It’s not a very nice place in general, but conditions are OK. He doesn’t complain,” his lawyer, Tatyana Nozhkina, said after Tuesday’s hearing.

Gershkovich had no medical complaints and was getting exercise by walking, she said, adding that he also was watching a cooking show on TV and reading, including Leo Tolstoy’s “War and Peace.”

“He said that in the morning he eats porridge, and he wrote to his mother that it looks like his childhood,” Nozhkina said, a reference to his Russian heritage. His parents moved to the United States from the Soviet Union.

“He’s in good fighting spirit. He’s ready to prove his innocence and defend media freedom,” she said.

She added that Gershkovich has received letters from his parents and supporters, but hasn’t been allowed any phone calls. He also told his lawyers he was thinking about writing a book about the ordeal when he’s free.

The case has exacerbated tensions between Moscow and the West over the invasion of Ukraine and is another sign of the Kremlin’s crackdown on opposition activists, independent journalists and civil society groups. The sweeping campaign of repression is unprecedented since the Soviet era. Activists say it often means the very profession of journalism is criminalized, along with the activities of ordinary Russians who oppose the war.

On Monday, in the same courthouse where Gershkovich’s hearing was held, top opposition figure Vladimir Kara-Murza Jr. was convicted of treason for publicly denouncing the war and sentenced to 25 years in prison. Last month, a court convicted a father over social media posts critical of the war after his daughter drew antiwar sketches in school and sentenced him to two years in prison.

Russia’s Foreign Ministry summoned the U.S., U.K. and Canadian ambassadors over “crude interference in Russia’s internal affairs” after they attended the Kara-Murza hearing Monday.

After pressing authorities for days to grant consular access to Gershkovich, U.S. Ambassador Lynne Tracy, who attended the hearing, said Monday she had visited him in prison. She tweeted that “he is in good health and remains strong,” reiterating a U.S. call for his immediate release.

U.S. President Joe Biden spoke to Gershkovich’s parents last week and again condemned his detention.

“We’re making it real clear that it’s totally illegal what’s happening, and we declared it so,” he said.

The last American reporter to be arrested on espionage charges by Moscow was Nicholas Daniloff in 1986. A correspondent for U.S. News & World Report, Daniloff spent 20 days in custody before being swapped for an employee of the Soviet Union’s U.N. mission who was arrested by the FBI, also on spying charges.

A top Russian diplomat said last week that Russia might be willing to discuss a potential prisoner swap with the U.S. involving Gershkovich — but after his trial. That means any exchange is unlikely soon.

In December, WNBA star Brittney Griner was exchanged for Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout following her trial and conviction on drug possession charges. She had been sentenced to nine years in prison and ended up spending 10 months behind bars.

Another American, Michigan corporate security executive Paul Whelan, has been imprisoned in Russia since December 2018 on espionage charges, which his family and the U.S. government have called baseless.