Opinion
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Evan Gershkovich, Paul Whelan and Alsu Kurmasheva, who were detained in Russia, pose wit

Evan Gershkovich, Paul Whelan and Alsu Kurmasheva, who were detained in Russia, pose with others aboard an aircraft after they were released, in this undated handout photograph obtained on Aug. 1. (OSV News/U.S. Government/Handout via Reuters)



by Michael Sean Winters

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President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris were both at Joint Base Andrews last week to welcome Paul Whelan, Evan Gershkovich and Alsu Kurmasheva back to the United States. The three had been imprisoned in Russia on false charges and were freed Aug. 1 in a prisoner exchange that was enormously complicated, involving the release of 16 people from Russian detention in exchange for 8 held in Western prisons.

The moment was profound. Whelan was, appropriately, first off the plane. His release was a long time coming after six years in Russian detention. He had traveled to Russia in 2018 to attend a friend's wedding. It is not surprising that Russian President Vladimir Putin thought nothing of taking away Whelan's freedom on

trumped up charges of espionage; Putin has imprisoned his own country in a vicious thugocracy. Whelan was no threat to Putin, he was merely a human bargaining chip.

After greeting Whelan on the tarmac, Biden removed his American flag lapel pin and pinned it on the former Marine's jacket. It was a stunning gesture of solidarity and respect for all that Whelan had suffered. Watching it on television just after midnight, it was difficult not to cry. I abandoned the effort.

Gershkovich is a reporter for The Wall Street Journal who was arrested last year after publishing a story on Russia's crumbling economy due in large part to the war effort. Making the front page of The Wall Street Journal is a big deal for a reporter. As Manuel Roig-Francia said in The Washington Post, Gershkoich's journalistic success turned into a personal "Kafkaesque nightmare."

Kurmasheva is a Russian-American journalist who was working for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty when she was arrested in 2023. She was sentenced to 6.5 years in a Russian penal colony earlier this year on charges of spreading "false information." For dictators like Putin, "false" and "unflattering" are synonymous terms.

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Two of the three Americans returning from their hellish experience were journalists. Even before I became a journalist, I was friendly with many in the trade. We can be insufferable. We are, by nature, contrarian, working in an industry that is constantly demanding new stories, new perspectives, new arguments, new analysis. For most of us, the work is demanding but involves no personal risk. For others, that risk is only too real. According to Reporters without Borders, which monitors the grim statistics, "A total of 779 journalists were jailed at some point in 2023 and 547 are currently in prison or under house arrest in a total of 45 countries."

Watching the happy reunions at Andrews, it was difficult not to think of another Wall Street Journal reporter who did not enjoy such a reunion. Daniel Pearl was beheaded by Islamist terrorists on Feb. 1, 2002. Going to Pakistan in the months after 9/11 took a courage I surely do not possess. Pearl's grisly murder was a searing experience for the country, and the most horrible catastrophe imaginable for his family. For journalists, Pearl's murder was, and must remain, a challenge. When we

say our profession demands that we write "without fear or favor," we must always know that for some journalists, fear is all too real.

Russian dissident Vladimir Kara-Murza was also released in last week's prisoner exchange. He had been a friend of the late Sen. John McCain, even serving as a pallbearer at the senator's funeral in 2018. In convicting Kara-Murza of treason, the Russian government cited a speech he gave to the Arizona legislature in 2022. He also had been a journalist and had survived two assassination attempts. His friends encouraged him not to return to Russia but he explained he was haunted by the question, "How can I ask my fellow Russians to stand up to Putin if I'm too afraid to do it myself?"

These are incredibly brave people who have suffered for the cause of truth and freedom. Their return is a source of joy, just as Pearl's death remains a source of pain all these years later. The Biden administration should be applauded by all for its tireless efforts to free Americans and others who are falsely imprisoned. For journalists, it felt great to welcome home those who do our profession proud.