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Ksenia Karelina: Russia sentences US-Russian citizen to 12 years in prison for treason

By Reuters

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Summary

Russian-American sentenced to 12 years for treason after donating money to Ukraine charity

Conviction comes two weeks after massive prisoner swap between Russia and West

Lawyer vows to appeal verdict

Supporters determined to bring her home

YEKATERINBURG, Russia, Aug 15 (Reuters) - Dual Russian-American citizen [Ksenia Karelina](#) was sentenced to 12 years in prison on Thursday after a Russian court found her guilty of treason for donating money to a charity supporting Ukraine.

The Los Angeles spa worker pleaded guilty at her closed trial in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg, where her case was heard by the same court and judge that convicted Wall Street Journal reporter [Evan Gershkovich](#) of espionage in July.

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The court said investigators found that on Feb. 24, 2022 - the first day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine - Karelina had "transferred funds in the interests of a Ukrainian organisation, which were subsequently used for the purchase of tactical medicine items, equipment, means of defeat and ammunition by the Armed Forces of Ukraine".

She had donated \$51.80 to Razom for Ukraine, a New York-based charity that provides humanitarian aid to children and elderly people in Ukraine. The charity has denied it provides any military support to Kyiv.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby called the sentencing cruel and said the United States would continue to seek consular access to her and press for her release.

"It's nothing less than vindictive cruelty. We're talking about 50 bucks to try to alleviate the suffering of the people in Ukraine, and to call that treason is just absolutely ridiculous," Kirby told reporters.

Christopher van Heerden, Karelina's boyfriend, said he was "angry and sad" at the 12-year sentence, and called on the U.S. State Department to declare her "wrongfully detained", a designation that would make winning her freedom a U.S. government priority.

"What about this is not wrongful?" said van Heerden, 36, a professional boxer from South Africa who met Karelina four years ago and planned to propose to her after she returned from visiting her family in Russia.

"She's facing 12 years in prison for a \$51 donation that she made as an American citizen on American soil."

The U.S. State Department, which advises Americans not to travel to Russia, said it reiterated its "strong warnings" about the danger they face there and urged any U.S. citizens currently in the country to leave.

In a separate development, the Moscow court service said on Thursday that another American, Joseph Tater, had been placed in pre-trial detention until Oct. 14 on a charge of assaulting a police officer. He is already serving a 15-day prison sentence for abusing staff in a Moscow hotel, which he denied, and could face up to five years if convicted on the assault charge.

A portrait of Ksenia Karelina with her former in-laws and ex-husband in Maryland, U.S, December 13, 2015. Eleonora Srebroski / Handout via REUTERS/File Photo [Purchase Licensing Rights](#) 

HOPED-FOR EXCHANGE

Karelina, 33, was not included in a [major prisoner swap](#) between Russia and the West two weeks ago that freed Gershkovich and 15 others from Russian and Belarusian jails in exchange for eight prisoners held in the West.

She appeared in court in a white sweatshirt and blue jeans, sitting calmly in a glass cage.

Speaking to reporters outside the courtroom, her lawyer Mikhail Mushailov said he was working to include her in a [future exchange](#).

"We will certainly perform legally-significant actions to start the exchange procedure and finalise it as soon as possible," he said, adding that Karelina planned to appeal.

Mushailov said that while Karelina admitted she had donated the money, she "did not envision that the funds that she transferred would be used for these anti-Russian activities."

INTERROGATIONS AT THE AIRPORT

Karelina was born in Russia and emigrated to the United States in 2012 via a work-study program, receiving American citizenship in 2021. Family and friends have described her as someone who didn't much care for politics and said they were shocked by her arrest.

[Problems began immediately](#) for Karelina on her arrival in Russia to visit family at the start of the year, when authorities learned she had a U.S. passport. Officers of the FSB security service interrogated her and took her cellphone, on which they found the 2022 donation to the charity, Razom.

The FSB interrogated her for up to two hours during mandatory weekly check-ins and banned her from leaving the city, according to the website www.freeksenia.com. [↗](#)

Three days before she was due to return to Los Angeles, Karelina was arrested on a hooliganism charge and jailed for 15 days. Just before her release, she was slapped with the state treason charge.

Reporting by Reuters in Moscow and London and Jonathan Landay, Steve Holland and Susan Heavey in Washington; Writing by Lucy Papachristou and Mark Trevelyan

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