
3 REASONS WHY RUSSIA FINALLY RELEASED UKRAINIAN PILOT NADEZHDA SAVCHENKO

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The most likely explanation for the timing of the deal is that the Kremlin hopes that the release of the controversial prisoner will convince European leaders to end economic sanctions against Russia.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, right, shakes hands with Ukrainian jailed pilot Nadezhda Savchenko, as he awards her with the Hero of Ukraine medal in the Presidential Office in Kiev, Ukraine, Wednesday, May 25, 2016. Photo: AP

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, right, shakes hands with Ukrainian jailed pilot Nadezhda Savchenko, as he awards her with the Hero of Ukraine medal in the Presidential Office in Kiev, May 25. Photo: AP

Last week Russia exchanged Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko for Russian citizens Evgeny Erofeev and Alexander Aleksandrov, who were fighting for the Luhansk People's Republic in Eastern Ukraine. Kiev tried them as terrorists, believing that they were working for Russias Main Intelligence Directorate, the foreign military intelligence agency of Russias Armed Forces (GRU). As for Moscow, it accused Savchenko of killing Russian journalists during Kiev's operation against Donbas insurgents.

So whats the most likely explanation for this prisoner swap?

Possibly, negotiations between Russia, Ukraine and representatives of the West, as well as pressure put upon the Kremlin by foreign governments and international organizations, made a difference. There came a point where Savchenko became a serious political threat to the Kremlin. It was necessary to resolve the situation and alleviate potential fallout. One way or another, the Ukrainian pilot would have had to be released at some point.

However, after the verdict was pronounced on Mar. 22, the situation was looking grim. Savchenko's lawyers pointed out the slowness of the procedure stipulated by the 1993 Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons. And since the Ukrainian pilot resolutely refused to appeal to the Russian President for a pardon and threatened to go on another hunger strike, no one could guarantee that the problem would get resolved.

The first signs of progress and hopes for a positive outcome emerged after Victoria Nuland, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, visited Ukraine at the end of April 2016. Back then when speaking to the Ukrainian President, Nuland gave the specific date for Savchenko's return - May 20, 2016.

After that, on May 23-24, the Normandy format members – German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President François Hollande, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Ukrainian colleague Petro Poroshenko - had a famous nighttime phone conversation, in which Poroshenko yet again urged Moscow to free Savchenko and other prisoners, including Crimean Tatars.

There are several reasons that explain why the Ukrainian pilot was freed at this particular time. First, the European Union is back to discussing the prolongation of sanctions that continue to have an adverse effect on the Russian economy. Further sanctions would deepen the recession that Russians are increasingly concerned about. According to Levada Center, as time goes by, the public is getting more and more worried about the economy. Back in 2014, 31 percent saw the economic crisis as a threat to Russia's national security, in 2015 the number increased to 36 percent, and this year 44 percent of Russian citizens shared this opinion.

There are several reasons for this trend. Based on statistical data, household income in Russia is steadily dropping and reached its lowest point in April. Even though opinion polls indicate that Russians are willing to be patient, the Kremlin understands the gravity of the situation and has to act to ensure that things do not get worse.

Perhaps the government decided that the time to pardon Savchenko had come and it would be well received all over the world and seen as act of good will and a pragmatic gesture on behalf of Russia towards Ukraine and its people.

Thus, Moscow planned that Savchenko's release would serve as the starting point for negotiations on at least a partial repeal of sanctions, especially since the issue is constantly on the agenda of not just the European Union, but also the U.S. Still, the pardon of Savchenko is not likely to result in the lifting of anti-Russian sanctions because the EU clearly does not see it as a good enough reason to reconsider them.

Second, the parliamentary elections for the State Duma of Russia coming up in September 2016 also influence the actions of the Russian political elite. The party in power, United Russia, is pushed to respond to Russia's international challenges and reassess its bilateral and multilateral relations with its foreign partners, including Ukraine.

Third, Savchenko's release is tied to the need to settle the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine as soon as possible. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the Minsk Agreements are a dead end. Reached in September 2014, the agreement is not working because it contradicts the interests of the involved parties, and no one knows how to make it effective. So the idea of developing a new format is quickly gaining momentum.

In this context, pardoning Savchenko looks like another stage in the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. French President Hollande called it an important step in the right direction. It remains to be seen if this event can revive the Minsk process on a full scale and help implement its

provisions in other areas, such as border control, the ceasefire and the withdrawal of troops and military equipment.

What is next?

Savchenko's release shows the benefits of targeted joint efforts of multiple parties, not just the ones that are immediately involved. All major contributors to global security efforts should work tirelessly to remove the source of instability in the heart of Europe.

In arranging for the release of Savchenko and exchanging her for two Russians, Ukraine and Russia created a precedent that can be later used as the foundation for further cooperation on humanitarian issues. The next thing on the agenda should be progress on the future of other detainees kept on both sides of the border.

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What makes the precedent special is that the problem was negotiated between Kiev and Moscow directly, albeit with the assistance of multiple international intermediaries.

This appears to be a step in the right direction and the optimal opportunity for starting a dialogue. It is high time to reconsider the relations between Russia and Ukraine in general and the ongoing Donbas conflict in particular. For Russia, it is time to get rid of the romantic perception of Novorossiya (the idea that part of Eastern Ukraine shares a historical destiny to return to Russia) and accept the harsh reality.

Then both sides can start building long-term points of contact and use them to rebuild international relations. Only then will Russia be able to claim its place in the new world and win the respect of the international community.

Kaynak/Source: