

# U.S. Deports High-Profile Hacker to Russia Before End of Prison Sentence

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September 28, 2021



An image taken from a video released by Russia's Interior Ministry shows Alexei Burkov being escorted off his flight after it landed in Moscow on Tuesday. Photo: Russian Interior Ministry/TASS/Zuma Press

Updated Sep. 29, 2021 6:03 am ET

WASHINGTON—The U.S. released a high-profile Russian cybercriminal from its custody this week, at least a year before his prison sentence was expected to finish, handing him over to Russian authorities despite long resisting Moscow's efforts to retrieve him.

Alexei Burkov, 31, was placed on a commercial airline flight on Monday after being released from federal prison last month, officials said. He was detained by Russian authorities at a Moscow airport Tuesday, according to Russian state media.

Mr. Burkov was extradited to the U.S. in late 2019 from Israel on hacking-related charges, including fraud, identity theft, computer intrusion and money laundering. He pleaded guilty to running web forums where hackers swapped stolen data and in June 2020 was sentenced

to nine years in prison, including time served while being held in custody by the Israelis since 2015.

Israeli authorities had arrested Mr. Burkov at the request of the U.S., sparking a yearslong battle between the U.S. and Russia. Mr. Burkov is wanted in Russia on hacking charges as well and is the subject of an Interpol red notice from 2017, said a spokeswoman for Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, which handled the hacker's removal.

A lawyer for Mr. Burkov declined to comment on the reason for his release. The Justice Department also declined to comment beyond confirming Mr. Burkov was released from prison on Aug. 25. Court proceedings in recent months before he was released are sealed.

Current and former officials said they were surprised by Mr. Burkov's release by U.S. authorities, especially given how aggressively the Justice Department had sought his extradition from Israel. Senior Justice Department officials have said that Russia relies on bad-faith requests to extradite its citizens arrested abroad on hacking charges and then either releases them or prosecutes them with light sentences.

The Russian government had spent years trying to block his extradition to the U.S. by filing legal challenges in Israel, where Mr. Burkov had been held in custody since 2015. His case highlighted how Russia has increasingly used a variety of techniques—whether leveraging the legal system or resorting to more coercive means, such as bribery—to pressure other countries to impede U.S. extradition efforts, the Journal has previously reported.

Russian officials didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

On Wednesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that Mr. Burkov's extradition could be considered to be "rather a positive development" in U.S.-Russia relations. He did not elaborate further.

Mr. Burkov was widely seen as a valuable asset to Moscow, according to U.S. and Israeli officials. Many Russian hackers have ties either to the Kremlin or to Russian oligarchs and can be forced into working for an intelligence service if they are brought home to Russia, which was likely a factor in Russia's interest Mr. Burkov, former officials have said. Mr. Burkov also was believed to possess detailed knowledge of the Russian cybercriminal world that would be valuable both to U.S. and Russian authorities, former officials said.

Mr. Burkov's case garnered international attention when the Kremlin offered to release a young Israeli-American woman, Naama Issachar, whom Russian authorities arrested on marijuana-possession charges and sentenced to eight years in prison. U.S. officials characterized Russia's attempt to dangle Ms. Issachar's freedom to block Mr. Burkov's extradition as Soviet-era coercion.

Ms. Issachar was later pardoned by Russian President Vladimir Putin, in January of last year.

Mr. Burkov's release comes as the Biden administration is engaged in bilateral talks with Moscow on cybersecurity issues with a particular focus on curtailing ransomware attacks, many of which are carried out by criminal gangs operating in Russia.

Those talks so far have yielded little progress, senior administration officials say.

“There is no indication that the Russian government has taken action to crack down on ransomware actors that are operating in the permissive environment they have created there,” Federal Bureau of Investigation Deputy Director Paul Abbate said at an intelligence conference earlier this month.

William Mauldin contributed to this article.

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Appeared in the September 29, 2021, print edition as 'U.S. Releases Hacker Back to Russia Early'.