

U.S. Journalist Expulsion Stirs Controversy

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U.S. journalist David Satter talking about his visa denial in an interview with The Guardian. **Lauretta Heckstall**

Russia has barred a U.S. journalist for five years in a move that has triggered a frenzy between Russian authorities and Western media on Tuesday, signaling possible heightened tensions ahead of upcoming Winter Olympic Games in Sochi.

It was not clear whether David Satter, 66, was banned entry into Russia for political or administrative reasons. Many media representatives cited the journalist's critical stance on President Vladimir Putin as the reason for the action, while Russia's Foreign Affairs Ministry bluntly denied any political interpretation, calling the reports "biased."

The expulsion is just the latest of many recent high-profile incidents to be seen by observers as calculated moves to protect and enhance Russia's image ahead of the upcoming Winter Olympics in Sochi. The recent release of high-profile prisoners, including former tycoon

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, two members of the Pussy Riot feminist punk band and the Arctic 30 Greenpeace activists, were all interpreted as an attempt by the Russian government to improve its image in the West ahead of the Feb. 7 opening ceremony.

Regardless of the actual reasons for the Satter's entry ban, Russia's image will likely deteriorate further as a result, as many English-language media outlets have already characterized the situation as another attempt by the Russian government to silence critics.

Satter initially claimed he was expelled after being denied an entry visa at the Russian consulate in Kiev, without mentioning earlier trouble with migration officials in Moscow. He told The Guardian that the situation was “an action against free speech and openness to the outside world.”

The journalist said in comments to The Guardian that Alexei Gruby, a diplomat at the consulate in Kiev, read him a prepared statement that said that “the competent organs” — a Soviet-era euphemism for security forces — “have decided that your presence on Russian territory is not desirable.”

Kevin Klose, president and chief executive of RFE/RL, a U.S. Congress-funded radio station, called Satter's expulsion “a fundamental violation of the right of free speech and journalistic liberty.”

RFE/RL's Moscow office declined to comment, citing an official order from top leadership.

Following the media outcry over the expulsion on Tuesday, Russia's Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying that Satter had violated migration legislation by staying in Russia without a valid visa from Nov. 22 to Nov. 26, which under the current law warranted a five-year entry ban.

Yury Materi, a spokesman for the ministry, told The Moscow Times that Satter entered Russia on Nov. 21, the very day his visa expired. He was issued an official media accreditation, which allows foreign journalists to work in Russia, and was told to apply for a visa extension with the migration service immediately.

But Satter went to the migration service only four days later, Materi said, which prompted the Tagansky District Court to fine and expel Satter on Nov. 29. According to the ministry's statement, Satter admitted his guilt and was given a few days to pack and leave the country. He left Russia on Dec. 4.

“We have 500,000 people who were barred from entering Russia,” Materi said on the phone. “Satter is just one of them and we have absolutely no reason to single him out,” he said.

Satter himself dismissed the official explanation as “bureaucratic trickery” in comments to the Associated Press. He also said that the Foreign Ministry had not provided him with a support letter for migration officials.

As of print time Tuesday, Satter could not be reached for comment.

Satter, a longtime Russia expert and correspondent, has published three books, in one of which he suggested that Russian security services organized the 1999 apartment building

bombings that led the government to wage war in Chechnya. In that book, he said the war was a tool that earned Putin quick popularity among the public and allowed him to achieve an easy victory in the 2000 presidential election.

Satter has traveled and lived in Russia extensively since 1969 and served as the Financial Times' Moscow correspondent from 1976 to 1982. He owns an apartment in Moscow and was thinking about moving his dog there, according to his colleagues.

Although media reports on Tuesday declared Satter the first American reporter to be banned since the fall of the Soviet Union, he joins a list of several other Western journalists to face a similar situation in recent years who attribute the move to critical reporting.

Rob Horstra and Arnold Van Bruggen, two Dutch journalists working on a multimedia project that focused on Sochi ahead of the Olympics, were refused new visas last September. In February 2011, British journalist Luke Harding was barred from re-entering Russia, and he attributed the move to his own critical reporting of the security services. Danish photographer Mari Bastashevski was expelled in 2010 for critical reporting on the North Caucasus. Natalya Morar, a Moldova native and investigative reporter for The New Times magazine, was refused entry in 2007. She said at the time that she was targeted for her reporting on corruption in the government.

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