

Journalist's Expulsion Reveals Visa Quagmire

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U.S. journalist David Satter

As pundits speculated about possible political repercussions of Russia's decision to bar U.S. journalist David Satter, the country's often cumbersome and conflicting visa application process came into the spotlight on Wednesday.

While for some observers the visa bureaucracy was seen as a tool to cushion the state's political decisions, for others it demonstrated the clear lack of an established procedure and coordination between various government agencies.

The Federal Migration Service seemed to try to neutralize the growing controversy by suggesting that Satter consider obtaining legal help.

"It is possible for him to come back. He just hires a lawyer and turns to a court," Alexander Aksenov, a spokesman for the migration service, told Interfax. "If the court agrees with

the journalist's arguments, then he can come back," he said.

Satter wrote on Twitter that he was "aware of the statement" and was "seeking advice."

Part of the confusion in Satter's case may stem from the fact that various government agencies are responsible for carrying out Russia's migration policy. While the Foreign Ministry issues visas outside of Russia, the migration service registers and keeps track of foreigners inside the country. The Federal Security Service is then responsible for border control.

But, as experts explained, the activities of the separate agencies sometimes overlap.

"The practice is that the FSB can declare anybody a threat to Russia's national security and rule out their entry into Russia, with or without a visa," said Irina Borogan, an intelligence analyst at Agentura.ru and co-author of "The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia's Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB."

"It is probably some mid-level FSB official that has written a letter saying that Satter's presence in Russia is not desirable," she said in a phone interview.

Dismissing a political interpretation of the problem, Natalia Kozyreva, a spokeswoman for the migration service, said that Satter's five-year ban from entering Russia was "automatic."

"The system works in such a way that whoever leaves the country on an expired visa is automatically put on a list of people barred from entering again," she said. "You can commit two administrative offenses with the same result, but with overstaying you only have to do it once," she said.

An EU citizen in her twenties, who declined to give her name to avoid complications in her case, found herself in such a position after circumstances rendered her unable to leave the country before her visa expired.

"I turned to a lawyer who told me the expired visa could be extended and then I could leave Russia and eventually come back with a new visa," she said.

The lawyer had not given her any paperwork that would make these promises formal, she said, so it remained unclear whether the visa could in fact be extended as she was told.

Lukman Anzhalilov, a migration lawyer with Lexfirm, said that it is possible to extend an expired visa provided there are strong reasons for why the individual overstayed it.

"If a journalist has been accredited by the Foreign Ministry, he may have a strong case in court, and the decision to bar him can be repealed," he said.

In comments published by The Wall Street Journal, Satter said he planned to continue writing about Russia.

His case is reminiscent of several other visa debacles experienced by foreign journalists in recent years.

In February 2011, Luke Harding, The Guardian's Moscow correspondent at the time, was refused entry into Russia at an airport due to his failure to present a journalistic accreditation from the Foreign Ministry. Authorities seemed to later backtrack, with the Foreign Ministry telling Harding that he could return to Russia as long as he left the country in May 2011. He decided to leave Russia anyway.

"More than 40 journalists have been denied entry into Russia in the 2000s, according to the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations," said Bogorad.

"Journalists should be singled out and protected from the bureaucratic quagmire, otherwise it sends a chilling message to others: we can kick you out if we want to," she said.

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