

U.S. NGO Consultant Faces Deportation in 'Perfect Storm'

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Jennifer Gaspar and her Russian husband, Ivan Pavlov, in St. Petersburg.

How does an expat get kicked out of Russia after living here for a decade? These days, a U.S. passport, NGO work and marriage to a "foreign agent" may be enough.

At least, this is the only way U.S. citizen Jennifer Gaspar and her Russian husband Ivan Pavlov can make sense of the otherwise inexplicable deportation order she found in her mailbox this week.

"It's a perfect storm. Several factors came together," Pavlov, a prominent human rights lawyer, told The Moscow Times from St. Petersburg on Wednesday.

The deportation order, which required Gaspar to leave Russia by Wednesday, declares her a threat to national security and constitutional order.

She now faces separation from her 5-year-old daughter, a Russian citizen, though she said

she hopes to stall the deportation in court. No date had been set for a hearing as of Wednesday.

Officials have not elaborated on the alleged threat posed by Gaspar, who works as an independent consultant for several Russian NGOs.

Her clients range from Hermitage Museum fundraisers to groups labeled "foreign agents," a derogatory tag from the Stalin era slapped since 2012 on organizations with foreign funding and accused of "political activity." The definition is vague enough to have even been applied to a bird conservancy and an association of cystic fibrosis patients.

A handful of her former clients were cited by St. Petersburg news site Fontanka.ru as dismissing the allegation against her as "absurd."

The St. Petersburg branch of the Federal Migration Service, which issued the deportation order, said Wednesday when contacted by The Moscow Times that it was only executing a decision of the Federal Security Service (FSB), a successor agency of the Soviet KGB.

A spokesman for the FSB's St. Petersburg branch said he would not comment for a Moscow-based publication.

"I cannot, will not and do not wish to comment on this," he said.

He redirected all inquiries to the agency's headquarters, which did not return a request for comment in time for publication.

The officials behind the order may have wanted to get to Pavlov through his wife, both Gaspar and Pavlov said.

The 43-year-old Russian lawyer has a lengthy track record of rights campaigning, starting with the Russian branch of the radical environmental organization Bellona, whose exposés of nuclear pollution in Russia earned it treason accusations in the 1990s.

In 2004, Pavlov founded the Institute for Information Freedom Development, which campaigns for governmental transparency in Russia. After Pavlov's meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama at the G20 summit in St. Petersburg last year, the organization was branded a "foreign agent," a tag it is currently combatting in court.

Pavlov survived a brutal beating in 2007. Police said the attack was likely related to his work, but never solved the case.

Pavlov said he doubted that his wife's deportation was directly linked to any ongoing cases in his portfolio.

But the combination of Gaspar's U.S. passport and his own activity made the family an easy target for security officials looking for screws to tighten, Pavlov said.

"I can just see some official thinking, 'This will look good on my resume,'" Gaspar said about her deportation.

Russia has embarked on a course of isolationist, anti-West policies since the start of Vladimir Putin's third term as president in 2012.

Independent activists and opposition figures have been hounded by the authorities and vilified in state media as "traitors" serving U.S. "imperialists." Hardline ideology has been ramped up further since the beginning of the crisis in Ukraine, where Russia and the West back opposing sides.

"The atmosphere is becoming increasingly negative," Gaspar said.

The couple, both self-professed news junkies, had to stop watching news programs at home because they did not want to answer the questions their daughter might have about them, she said.

Pavlov said he started receiving threats through the mail recently, but was not taking them seriously.

The married couple, who first met when Pavlov was on a trip to San Francisco in 2003, is in a tight spot now, as neither Pavlov nor their daughter has a U.S. passport.

"I don't know how we'll explain this to our child," Pavlov said.

As for the family's adult relatives, "they're still reeling," he said. But the couple has been flooded with calls and letters of support, including from strangers.

"We never gave any serious thought to running away from Russia," Gaspar said. "We are now."

But so far, they are keeping up a brave front. "Nothing's hopeless until you're dead," Pavlov said about their case by telephone, before hurrying off to collect paperwork required for the hearing.

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