

Western Scholars Alarmed by Russian Deportations, Fines

By [Carl Schreck](#)

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WASHINGTON — The plainclothes officers found the scholar in a state archive poring over texts on 19th-century provincial life in Russia. They requested a meeting in the hallway.

At issue was the Western researcher's tourist visa. By studying historical documents in the archive, located in one of Russia's regions, the scholar had violated the terms of the visa, the officers from the Russian Federal Migration Service (FMS) said.

Within hours, a judge had slapped a fine and deportation order on the researcher, saying the infraction constituted a danger to Russian society, according to court documents seen by RFE/RL.

The scholar left the country two days later, befuddled at the circumstances of the expulsion. "They never answered my questions about what paperwork I needed," the researcher told RFE/RL on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter.

The case is one of several over the past year that have unsettled Western academics concerned that Russia may be ratcheting up bureaucratic pressure on foreign scholars.

During the past 12 months, at least four Westerners have been fined, deported or threatened with these penalties while conducting academic research in Russia due to alleged visa violations, according to court documents, interviews with scholars and publicly available information.

In two of these cases — including that of the deported scholar who spoke to RFE/RL — the individuals said they were plucked out of state archives by Russian migration officials.

"There does, indeed, appear to be much greater scrutiny of foreign scholars and students concerning visa status of late," says a second Western scholar, who told RFE/RL that officials in Siberia threatened to deport him last year for purportedly failing to properly register his visa — a charge he denies.

Academics Nervous

Whether these incidents are anomalous or part of a larger, coordinated clampdown remains unclear. Several scholars posited that local officials may simply be trying to burnish their credentials by tightening control of Westerners in the country amid battered ties between Russia and the West over the Ukraine conflict.

Will Stevens, a spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, told RFE/RL that "we have seen some reports of Western academics facing increased scrutiny and obstacles inside Russia.

"So far, these incidents appear to be isolated and seem to represent a very small minority of the large number of Western academics who travel and study in Russia," he added.

The anxiety is nonetheless palpable among Western academics specializing in Russia and the former Soviet Union.

Access to Russian archives is crucial for scholars in the field, says Russia historian Stephen Cohen, professor emeritus at New York University. "A Ph.D. student pretty much has to go to Russia to work in those archives to satisfy his or her dissertation committee," Cohen says. "That's the nature of the historical profession. If there are archives on your subject, you've got to go work in them."

Several scholars in the field declined to be interviewed or be identified on the record when contacted by RFE/RL, citing concerns that speaking publicly about the issue could hinder access to Russian archives.

The Russian Embassy in Washington did not respond to repeated e-mails requesting comment, and several calls to its press office went unanswered.

Lynda Park, executive director of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), said in a recent e-mail to the organization's members that stories about these visa problems "seem few and far between and happening outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg."

The U.S.-based scholarly society asked its some 3,000 members in the e-mail to report any visa difficulties they have had in the past two years.

Park says that as of March 30, the organization had received reports of three incidents, the details of which she could not disclose because they were provided in confidence. It was unclear if those incidents were among the four documented by RFE/RL. "Even three are unfortunate to see, having a detrimental impact on the individual researchers' work," she says.

'Laws Can Change'

Foreigners often conduct academic research in Russia using business and tourist visas, which can be obtained quickly and directly from a travel agency. Humanitarian visas, which are more applicable for scholarly work, require greater time and planning, as travelers must find a willing host organization or institute inside Russia.

Russian authorities have largely turned a blind eye toward scholarly activities conducted on business and tourist visas. The deportations and fines levied against Western scholars over the past year suggest officials in at least some Russian regions may be moving to end this practice.

"It does feel like they're tightening the rules, but they haven't seemed to impose any new rules. It's that they're enforcing old rules that they never used to enforce before," says Sam Greene, director of the Russia Institute at King's College London.

He adds that foreign scholars had run afoul of Russian authorities due to their visa status prior to the incidents over the past year as well.

In any case, Russian law does not forbid foreigners from entering publicly accessible archives, regardless of the travelers' visa status, says Arch Getty, a historian at UCLA who has consulted scholars on Russian visa issues for two decades.

Getty says that until recently he had "never heard of a case where a specific visa requirement was being enforced in an archive or a library," adding, "It is very new."

A Ph.D. student at Britain's University of Nottingham wrote in a March 13 Facebook post that a day earlier she was "pulled out of the reading rooms" in a state archive in Russia's northern Arkhangelsk region by police and immigration officials.

The student wrote that the officials said her "business cultural" visa was "not suitable for archival work" and that she needed a "scientific and technical" visa for such research.

She wrote that she was issued a fine, adding in a subsequent Facebook comment that she was later allowed back in the archive. "I'm going to work very quickly just in case!" she wrote.

In a fourth case, a court in Nizhny Novgorod deported a U.S. woman in June 2014 after finding her guilty of conducting "scientific-research activities" while traveling on a transit visa, according to a statement by the court. Specifics of that case, including the individual's name, were not immediately available.

The Western scholar who says authorities in Siberia threatened to deport him last year told RFE/RL that migration and Federal Security Service officials "questioned me about every trip I've made to Russia over the last 20 years and asked specifics about my research for each trip as well as my educational background."

"I had to write out a lengthy statement acknowledging my background and the charge and then they let me off without a fine," the scholar said on condition of anonymity.

He said he asked the officers if he would be able to return the following year and reside in the same accommodation, where the officers accused him of living illegally. "They said: 'Who is to know? Laws can change,'" he said.

Neutral Subjects

The allegations in these incidents resemble those levied against several Americans expelled from Russia since April 2014, a month after the United States and the EU put sanctions on Russia in response to its annexation of Ukraine's Crimea territory.

During this period, Russian courts have ordered at least 11 U.S. citizens out of the country for alleged visa violations for purported "political" activities, "propagandizing American values," or their work with nongovernmental organizations, which Russian officials and state media often paint as nefarious agents of Western influence.

Neither the graduate student nor the deported scholar interviewed by RFE/RL, however, appear to have been researching politically sensitive subjects when they were removed from state archives.

The Ph.D. student is studying female prostitution in Russia between 1900 and 1930, while the deported scholar claims to have been examining documents related to the economics of 19th-century Russia.

The graduate student wrote on Facebook that she suspects the archive staff may have alerted authorities about her presence and visa status because immigration officials "had printed copies of all of the e-mails I'd sent to the archive" when they first approached her.

The deported scholar said it remained unclear "who reported me or how they detected my presence in the archive."

"That was completely unnecessary," said the researcher, who said he had been hit with a five-year ban on entering Russia. "What would it have been for them to tell me to leave or to change my visa?"

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