

Former Moscow Times Publisher Allowed Back to Russia

By [Daria Litvinova](#)

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In a rare instance of a foreign national managing to overcome a Russian entry ban, Maxine Maters, a former publisher of The Moscow Times and a Dutch national, was given permission by a court Thursday to return to Russia.

Despite initial speculation by some that her ban was politically motivated, the reason turned out to be somewhat more banal, Maters said: It was the result of inaccurate data about traffic fines.

Maters was barred from entering Russia in February 2014 by the Federal Migration Service (FMS) for allegedly having incurred two traffic fines within three years, which under federal law is enough to get foreigners banned from the country. It took Maters and her lawyer almost six months to prove there had been only one fine, and that there was therefore no legal foundation for the ban.

Unexpectedly Exiled

Maters, who first arrived in Russia more than 20 years ago, found out she was prohibited from entering the country that had long been her home in July 2014 when she flew in to Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport — only to be told she could not leave the transit zone.

"There was nothing I could do. It was late evening and, I think, the weekend, so I was put back on the first flight out of Moscow" to London, she told The Moscow Times on Friday.

It later turned out that by the time Maters discovered the ban, it had already been in force since February — for almost half a year, Maters' lawyer Veronika Salnikova told The Moscow Times on Friday.

"During that period between February and July, Maxine had freely traveled in and out of Russia, and no one had ever tried to revoke her visa. She only found out about it after five months," Salnikova said.

In 2014 Maters, who had been publisher of The Moscow Times from 2004 to 2008, was writing a book about sailing through Russia.

"I was a first mate on the first foreign-flagged sailboat to cross Russia from the White Sea to the Black Sea," said Maters.

Bureaucratic Muddle

In December 2014 Salnikova sent an official request to the FMS, inquiring about the reasons for the ban.

The answer was not definitive. "It just stated that the ban existed and that the order implementing it was issued on Feb. 13, but the reasons weren't explained," she said.

It was only in March 2015 when the court proceedings commenced that Maters and her lawyer finally found out what had prompted the ban: Maters had supposedly incurred two fines for traffic violations.

"We asked for a break at that point to clarify the situation and see if there were really any fines," said Salnikova. "We sent another official request, this time to the Interior Ministry, asking them to check the traffic police federal database. According to their database, Maters had never violated any traffic regulations and there was no record of any fines."

The judge then decided to look into the local Moscow traffic fines database herself, and discovered one fine of 1,000 rubles (\$18), issued in 2012. Maters recalled afterward that she had once been pulled over by the police in Moscow.

"I remember it, there was a fine. And I think I paid it," she told The Moscow Times.

The court ruled that one traffic fine wasn't enough to justify a ban, and the entry ban was lifted.

Maters said she plans to return to Russia as soon as possible, but expects it will take the

authorities all summer to complete formal procedures and communicate the ban's repeal to all entry points.

"I've been in Russia for so long," she said. "All my friends are there, people who depend on me. ... My home was always in Russia. All this time I just couldn't go home," she said.

No Isolated Case

Russian courts and the FMS are swamped with cases like this, said Salnikova.

"When I was in court, there was a hearing every 15 minutes into a case like this," she said. "And statistics I have collected suggest that only 3-5 percent of them turn out in favor of the plaintiff. Almost always the judge sides with the FMS."

The role of the FMS is passive in situations like this, the lawyer said. If their database shows there are enough violations to ban a person from entering Russia, they enact a ban, and all the disputes are left to the courts.

A request for comment sent by The Moscow Times to the FMS regarding Maters' case and banning practices in general went unanswered by publication time.

Salnikova said that a significant number of plaintiffs in such cases are immigrants from former Soviet states.

"Is there an agenda in banning people from these countries or isn't there? I'm not sure, but there might be," she said.

Maters said she firmly believes that the law making it possible to bar foreigners from entering Russia is aimed at people who come from former Soviet republics. "This act is aimed at former Soviet citizens, to keep them out," she said. "But they can't discriminate like that. So I was not the only one," she said.

From the end of 2013 — when the migration service and traffic police joined their databases — to March 2014, 1,000 foreigners from countries outside the former Soviet Union had their work visas revoked for committing two or more legal violations, Bloomberg reported last March.

Dura Lex, Sed Lex

The federal law that regulates foreigners entering and staying in Russia states that if during a three-year period, two or more administrative infringements are recorded, foreigners can be banned from entering the country, even if the fines are paid promptly as in Maters' case, said Salnikova.

"It would, however, have made a difference if she had contested the fine back then," the lawyer said. "If she'd done so and a court had acquitted her, it would have changed everything."

Contact the author at newsreporter@imedia.ru

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