

Reporters Without Borders

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Europe/Ex-USSR - Russia

Persona non grata

Another outspoken foreign journalist expelled, banned for five years

16 January 2014

Reporters Without Borders condemns Russia's decision to ban well-known US journalist **David Satter** from visiting the country's for five years. [Announcing the decision on 14 January](#), the foreign ministry said he was banned for spending five days in the country, from 22 to 26 November, without a valid visa.

This dubious explanation was a long time coming. A Russian diplomat in Kiev already told him on 25 December that he would not be able to return because his presence in Russia had been deemed "undesirable."

"We are shocked by the disproportion between Satter's alleged offence and the punishment, especially as the offence seems to have been the result of the foreign ministry's own delay in giving him a document," Reporters Without Borders said.

"Like other foreign reporters who have been expelled in recent years, Satter is known for being very critical of the Putin regime. This just reinforces the impression that this ban is linked to his activities as a journalist.

"This violation of freedom of information sends a bad signal to the international media just a weeks before the Sochi Winter Olympics. We urge the Russian authorities to rescind this ban and to allow Satter, whose entire career has been linked to Russia, to go back to work."

A former *Financial Times* correspondent in Moscow, Satter has written several political books about contemporary Russia in which he is very critical of the Kremlin. An abridged version of his 2003 book about Vladimir Putin's rise to power, entitled "Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State," was published in Russia in February 2013. After last month's Volgograd bombings, he described the Sochi region as a "war zone."

Satter returned to Moscow on a business visa in September with the intention of being based there as an adviser to *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*. As soon as he obtained his official press accreditation in early November, he set about getting his business visa replaced by a journalist visa that would allow him an extended stay.

[According to his detailed explanations](#), the invitation that the foreign ministry had promised to give him on 22 November, which would have allowed him to obtain a visa the same day, was in fact not given to him until four days later, after his existing visa had expired.

As a result, he was refused a visa, fined and forced to leave Russia to begin a new visa application from scratch in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev.

Three weeks later, on 25 December, after being told that his visa had been approved, a diplomat at the Russia embassy in Kiev finally read him a statement that said: "The competent organs have decided that your presence on the territory of the Russian Federation is undesirable."

Despite requests from the US authorities, the Russian foreign ministry provided no explanation until its terse statement of 14 January. Satter recognizes that he overstayed, but blames the Russian authorities and accuses them of engineering a pretext to prevent him from continuing to work in Russia.

Although Satter is the first US journalist to be banned from Russia since the end of the Cold War, other foreign reporters critical of the Kremlin have been similarly treated in recent years.

The Guardian's Moscow correspondent, British journalist **Luke Harding**, [was expelled in 2011](#). **Natalia Morar**, a Moldovan journalist working in Moscow for the Russian opposition weekly *The New Times*, was declared [persona non grata](#) in 2007. Two Dutch journalists, photographer **Rob Hornstra** and filmmaker **Arnold van Bruggen**, the authors of "[The Sochi Project](#)," were denied entry in September.

But even the most critical foreign journalists are relatively protected compared with their Russian counterparts, who are subject to [judicial harassment](#) leading in some cases to [long spells in prison](#).

Russia is ranked 148th out of 179 countries in the 2013 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.

(Photos : Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)

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