

Ministry Maintains Journalist Can Return

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The  **Moscow Times**

Deported British reporter Luke Harding could apply for a new visa, the Foreign Ministry said Wednesday — just one day after the ministry's head claimed the journalist's visa was never annulled at all.

"We see no hurdles. He must go to the Russian Embassy. They will give him a visa so that he can continue his work for the period for which it was prolonged," said ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich, Interfax reported.

Harding, The Guardian's correspondent in Russia, was barred from entering the country last Saturday, when border guards at Domodedovo Airport annulled his visa, locked him in a cell for 45 minutes and then sent him back to London on the next plane, all without explanation.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Tuesday that Harding's six-month visa, which the ministry had issued in November, continued to be valid.

"Nobody annulled his visa," Lavrov said at a news conference in Moscow with his colleague

from Senegal, Madicke Niang, RIA-Novosti [reported](#).

Harding refuted this Wednesday, writing on his Twitter blog: "There is a large official blue stamp over the visa and the word: 'Annulled'. Dated 5/2/11."

The Foreign Ministry said in a statement late Tuesday that Harding had violated a series of rules, but only named one — his failure to pick up his press card.

But Lavrov hinted that Harding was punished for repeatedly visiting the North Caucasus without informing the Interior Ministry, as foreign reporters are required to.

"He admitted that he incorrectly visited counterterrorist operation zones," Lavrov said, adding that Harding "asked us to make an exception and give him a visa extension until May, which was done."

Lavrov's comments indirectly confirmed that his ministry first wanted to expel Harding and his family in November.

"That expulsion was partially delayed after intervention by the British government, but it was understood that Luke would have to leave by May 2011. We did not make this public at the time but it discredits attempts to portray this week's expulsion as an administrative error," The Guardian said in an e-mailed statement late Tuesday.

But the newspaper's spokesperson said later the same day that "we welcome the offer from the Russian Foreign Ministry to give our Moscow correspondent, Luke Harding, a new visa so he may continue to work in Russia. Luke and the Guardian are now considering the offer very carefully."

Still, sources in both the Foreign Ministry and the Kremlin said the decision was made by the security services "without consulting anybody," Kommersant reported Wednesday.

A law enforcement source only told RIA-Novosti on Tuesday that Harding had been blacklisted by an unidentified "Russian structure."

Human rights activists said the case highlighted a main deficiency in the country's leadership, that one hand doesn't know what the other does.

"The fact that the Foreign Ministry apparently didn't know of Harding's ban, even though they issued his visa, shows how dysfunctional this government is," said Tanya Lokshina of Human Rights Watch's Moscow office.

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