The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Paving the Way for Visa-Free Regime With EU

By Fyodor Lukyanov

August 18, 2010



Over the past eight years, there has been a lot of talk about establishing a visa-free regime between Russia and the European Union. This summer the initiative received a small boost when German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Finnish President Tarja Halonen and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi made encouraging statements about lifting visa rules. French President Nicolas Sarkozy has also expressed support for the idea.

The visa question first appeared on the agenda in 2002 on the eve of EU expansion when Moscow and Brussels were faced with the problem of Kaliningrad. While discussing the fate of the residents of Kaliningrad, Moscow first demanded visa-free status for residents of the exclave — which is cut off from the rest of Russia by Lithuania and Belarus — and then for all Russian citizens.

The discussions continued for several years and ended with a modest agreement on easing the visa regime that unified procedures and expanded the terms for issuing multiple and long-

term visas. It was better than nothing, but it was not what Russia had demanded. Cutting a little red tape in issuing visas and establishing a visa-free regime are two very different things.

The plan for a visa-free regime will still entail border checkpoints to examine passports. But the one big headache that would be eliminated is that travelers would no longer have to apply to embassies, fill out onerous applications, stand in line and pay a fee.

The objection to a visa-free regime most often heard is that non-Russians would be able to make their way from Russian territory into Europe with no checks, but this is unfounded. First, Russia and the EU signed a re-admission agreement that would obligate either side to take back deported illegal immigrants. Second, border controls would not be removed, so anybody with a non-Russian passport attempting to enter the EU would simply be denied entry.

One way or another, all the technical and procedural problems can be resolved, whether it entails making modifications to the border crossing, improving electronic systems or reorganizing specific agencies. The real question is whether there is enough political will on both sides to make it happen.

The stereotypes of the 1990s about huddled masses of hungry Russians and waves of hardened criminals and members of the Russian mafia pouring uncontrollably into Europe are long outdated. European law enforcement agencies generally agree that a visa-free regime is unlikely to have an impact on the crime level in Europe. Of course, politicians everywhere are always distrustful of any move to liberalize movement across borders if it might arouse opposition from European nationals.

The visa issue is not the prerogative of individual European governments but of the EU as a whole. And it is perhaps the only topic that Moscow must discuss with the EU itself, not with national capitals. Of course, if the member states unanimously support the visa-free regime with Russia, the European Commission will have to accept it. But there are no such prospects at present. Some EU states have no concerns at all about such an arrangement, while others are trying to use the issue to squeeze something out of Russia in other areas. Also, the European Commission itself is constantly struggling with member states for power and influence, and whenever something concerning this topic depends on the commission's support, it tries to "sell" its influence for the highest possible price.

But a breakthrough will only come when the EU grants visa-free status based on mutual agreements and not as a reward for good behavior by this or that country as it does now.

The principle of conditionality is one of the main and most effective foreign policy instruments used by the EU. If a country wants to improve ties with the union in a particular sphere, it must fulfill certain conditions, which may not be related to that sphere. But when European countries and institutions began gravitating toward the idea that a visa-free regime with Russia would benefit Europeans themselves, all the obstacles will disappear overnight. It seems that this shift in thinking is beginning to take place. Europe's economic problems have forced it to look for new opportunities, and Russia presents a wide new field — despite the peculiarities of doing business with this country.

The fact that Moscow has started signing visa-free agreements with other countries — such as Israel, Turkey, Brazil and Argentina — has served as a catalyst with the EU. Nothing earthshaking happened in any of those instances, but in all these cases, economic ties between these countries and Russia — especially in tourism — grew. Greece is an interesting example. If it had the authority to scrap the visa requirement for Russians on a unilateral basis without having to get the consent of the EU, it would have done so long ago — particularly given Greece's serious economic problems and its desperate need to attract more tourists and capital.

There might be a similar logic behind the Kremlin's insistence. Of course, Moscow might be motivated by a desire to provide opportunities to Russians, although it is estimated that this question concerns no more than 5 percent of the population.

Perhaps more important is that removing unnecessary barriers in EU-Russian relations could boost initiatives coming from outside Russia. The ruling elite is starting to publicly acknowledge what everybody already knew: Russia cannot modernize using its own domestic resources alone; it needs to drastically increase economic ties with developed, innovation-based economies.

The Kremlin is understandably reluctant to declare a visa-free regime for EU citizens on a unilateral basis. Russia surely remembers when Ukraine unilaterally initiated a visa-free regime for EU citizens in 2005. The only thing Kiev received in exchange was a simple "thank you" from Brussels. Nonetheless, a unilateral gesture from Moscow would certainly help improve relations.

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