

Visa-Free Pact With EU Is Elusive

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel stepping out of a car in Berlin last week for celebrations of West Germany and East Germany's reunification. As EU countries struggle with existing integration and immigration, **Berthold Stadler**

When Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos launched an initiative in January to lift visa restrictions between the European Union and Russia, he raised hopes among Russians and Europeans fed up with long lines and bureaucratic headaches.

But nine months later, it is clear that these hopes will not be realized anytime soon — even though President Dmitry Medvedev has been soliciting, and winning, support from individual EU countries.

Indeed, the only country championing the issue has been Russia since the Spanish EU presidency expired in July, indicating that Moscow wants the reform far more than Europe.

At the last EU-Russia summit in Rostov-on-Don in May, Brussels failed to offer a road map for visa-free travel. Instead, EU officials raised new demands, like lifting registration

requirements for foreigners living in Russia.

Russian officials retorted by unexpectedly handing over a draft agreement for waiving visas, thus gaining leverage that they can use to force Brussels to explain its position whenever they ask.

During the summer, Medvedev collected support from Finnish President Tarja Halonen, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean Claude Juncker.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin last month even promised visa-free travel to football fans if Russia wins its bid to host the 2018 or 2022 World Cup.

Last week, Putin told students in Krasnoyarsk that a visa-free regime should come because "the majority of our partners in Europe support this idea."

But he failed to mention that any EU decision has to be made unanimously — meaning that each of the bloc's 27 members has veto power.

Some countries have more or less openly come out against it.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose government usually takes a friendly line toward Moscow, told reporters in Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, this week that "there's yet a long way to go" for a visa-free regime with Moscow.

While Merkel did not name any reasons, Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite said at the same news conference that it was too early to talk about the issue because the EU had other priorities in the same neighborhood — namely Ukraine.

"We have other neighbors, and I mean Ukraine and others who are important for us," she said, according to a transcript on the web site of the German government's press office.

Grybauskaite's point is that there can be no visa agreement with Moscow before a similar deal has been reached with the members of the Eastern Partnership, a group of six former Soviet republics that also includes Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova.

Negotiations with those countries and Russia on visa-free travel into the EU's Schengen zone are ongoing.

Elmar Brok, a lawmaker in the European Parliament and member of Merkel's Christian Democrats, said the talks with Moscow should be held simultaneously, but Russia should not be allowed visa-free travel before Georgia and Ukraine.

Otherwise, he said, people from Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, most of whom hold Russian passports, will be able to travel more easily to Europe than Georgian passport holders.

He said a similar argument holds for Crimea in Ukraine, where many people hold Russian passports.

"We must not give these people extra incentives to move closer to Russia," he said by

telephone from Strasbourg.

Brok dismissed Russian accusations that Europe was dragging its feet on the issue in order to keep a bargaining chip in complex negotiations for a new partnership agreement with Russia.

"All this is about is fulfilling the technical criteria," he said.

EU officials have said countries wishing for visa-free travel must introduce passports and border controls that meet standards laid down in the Schengen agreement.

Experts said that while negotiations with Ukraine and Russia might be relatively easy, reaching an agreement with the other Eastern Partnership members with less advanced infrastructure could prove more difficult.

"It is of course a burden for Russia if it has to wait for Azerbaijan to catch up," said George Schoepflin, a European Parliament lawmaker for Hungary's conservative Fidesz party.

Schoepflin said European lawmakers hoped to get the negotiations done within the current legislative period, which runs until 2014.

Apart from technical and foreign policy requirements, the issue might increasingly get tangled in EU members' domestic politics.

Many western European countries are currently debating whether their populations can cope with growing immigration from within and outside the EU.

Last month, France provoked controversy after it forcibly sent more than 200 Gypsies back to Romania. Germany, meanwhile, is heatedly debating its migration policies after Social Democrat politician and Central Bank executive Thilo Sarrazin claimed in a book that Islam is to blame for immigrants' poor integration.

Schoepflin warned that the political climate in Europe is making it increasingly difficult to open more borders.

"Europe is under considerable pressure, especially from the south, where a demographic explosion and climate change are fostering emigration," he told The Moscow Times. "At the same time, Europeans have to put up with a lot of migrants. There is rising irritation, to some extent also among political elites."

Interestingly, such reservations are unlikely to come from eastern EU members.

Marko Mihkelson, chairman of the Estonian parliament's European affairs committee, said voters in his country would probably welcome lifting visa requirements for Russians. He noted that Estonia saw a tremendous increase in tourism from Russia after joining the Schengen zone in December 2007, which allows entry with visas from any participating state.

"We definitely support visa-free [travel] between Europe and Russia once all requirements are met," he said, referring to the Eastern Partnership countries.

Marek Menkiszak, an analyst with the Polish Center for Eastern Studies, said that while there

were no recent opinion polls on this issue, Poles were probably not concerned about mass migration. "People like to have open borders," he said.

Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski told Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last week in Warsaw that Poland backs Russia's proposal for visa-free travel.

Warsaw has said it also wants the Eastern Partnership members to join, but at the same time, it is lobbying for a change in the Schengen treaty to allow Russians from the Kaliningrad exclave to travel to the EU without visas.

This move, however, has gotten a chilly reception from the Baltic states.

Mihkelson, the Estonian lawmaker, explained that making such an exception could trigger a domino effect in other border regions.

"Why give this privilege to Kaliningrad and not to Pskov?" he said, in reference to the western Russian region that borders Estonia.

Tallinn, which has no border agreement with Russia since the State Duma refused to ratify a treaty in 2005, is also concerned that members of its Setu (sometimes spelled Seto) ethnic minority that lives on both sides of the border cannot easily travel to see their kin in Russia since Estonia joined the Schengen zone.

"Let's get easier visa rules for the whole Russian Federation and not for specific regions," Mihkelson said.

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