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U.S., Russia Won't End WTO Talks in 2010, U.S. Chamber Says

By The Moscow Times

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Russia and the U.S. won't resolve issues standing in the way of accession by the world's largest energy exporter to the World Trade Organization this year, a senior U.S. Chamber of Commerce official said Thursday.

Issues blocking an agreement by the end of this month include U.S. demands for greater access for agricultural products, mainly poultry and pork; legislation to protect intellectual property; and Russian restrictions on imports and exports, said Myron Brilliant, senior vice president for international affairs at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. An internal U.S. government deadline for resolving talks by the end of December is also likely to be missed, he said.

"I don't expect that next week the two sides will conclude all technical aspects of the negotiations," Brilliant said in an interview in Moscow, where he is meeting Russian business leaders. With "four or five areas that need to be narrowed," December is also "going to be a

tough deadline to meet," he said.

President Dmitry Medvedev signed an agreement with U.S. President Barack Obama in June to resolve contentious points between the two sides by the end of this month as part of his quest to diversify Russia's oil-dominated economy. Russia, the largest economy excluded from the WTO, has been trying to gain entry to the 123-member, Geneva-based body for almost two decades.

"Practical" matters will be the chief stumbling block for winding up the bilateral talks by the end of 2010, Brilliant said. U.S. congressional elections on Nov. 2, Obama's visit to Asia in November and summits of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum and the Group of 20 are among events that will prevent the talks from being concluded, he said.

"I do hope, though, that we'll have a deal done sooner than two years" from now, Brilliant said.

The two countries also need to agree on rule-of-origin issues associated with Russia's customs union with two of its former Soviet neighbors, Kazakhstan and Belarus, he said. The union is due to come into force in 2012.

"The two leaders are personally committed to trying to strengthen the relationship," Brilliant said. "You want to make sure that while there is momentum that we try to close the gap, because if we allow for the momentum to disappear, what's going to happen is the list of issues are going to grow."

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Tuesday that Russia would not be in the WTO this year, but Washington and Moscow are keen to push ahead in the coming months.

Another impediment to Russia's entry bid is Georgia, a pro-West nation on Russia's southern tier that lost a brief war with Russia in 2008 when an assault by Georgia's U.S.-trained military on the rebel region of South Ossetia triggered a crushing counterstrike from Russia, its former Soviet master.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili said Thursday that his country, a member of the WTO, might not be the last country to agree to Russia's accession.

"You should give us some time until we are maybe the last ones," Saakashvili said in an interview. "Maybe we won't be the last ones."

(Bloomberg, Reuters)

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