

WTO Sights Set on April

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Maxim Medvedkov **Denis Grishkin**

Russia may complete talks on joining the World Trade Organization as early as in April, with just a couple of issues remaining unsolved, the Economic Development Ministry said Tuesday.

“It's technically possible to complete the talks in April,” said Maxim Medvedkov, head of the ministry's Trade Negotiation Department, which would allow accession by early 2012.

Medvedkov, who also chairs Russia's delegation on joining the WTO, said a new round of talks would start in Geneva next week, adding that the country is now in its 18th year of attempts to join the organization.

“It's quite possible that it will be the last year in this process. We hope so,” he told a news conference.

Russia has reached agreement on 99 percent of issues, including passing amendments to legislation in order for it to comply with the norms of the organization, he said.

Medvedkov is not concerned about Georgia's demand to allow its customs officials to be posted on internationally recognized borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

"We hope that this problem won't stop our accession," he said, adding that one country can't block accession of another country.

Georgia is already a member of the trade bloc, and according to WTO rules, any of its 153 members may veto Russia's accession.

Moscow submitted its application to join the WTO in June 1993, nearly 18 years ago, and despite promises from the United States to speed up its accession, the country remains the largest economy outside the bloc.

The issues to be discussed in Geneva include the size of agricultural subsidies after joining the WTO, and meat import quotas.

The government plans to double agricultural subsidies by 2012, providing a total of \$9 billion annually to support farmers, but may subsequently reduce that figure to \$4 billion to \$4.5 billion over the next five to seven years.

Concerning meat import quotas, Medvedkov said a compromise should be found "to create a balance between the interests of producers and consumers." He also said Russia was in talks with 10 to 12 countries on the size of the quotas.

President Dmitry Medvedev signed a new food security doctrine last year, which called for 85 percent of all meat consumed in the country to be produced domestically by 2020.

Medvedkov also said the verdict recently handed down to former Yukos head Mikhail Khodorkovsky was unlikely to affect negotiations on the WTO bid because the talks in Geneva would be related to "purely trade issues" and the Khodorkovsky issue "wouldn't be raised for sure."

The WTO "is a trading platform" and it "shouldn't be used for solving other problems," he said.

Khodorkovsky's latest sentence, which is likely to keep him imprisoned until 2017, may negatively affect Russia's image and complicate the country's bid to join the bloc, an unidentified official at the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama said last month, Reuters reported.

Meanwhile, Russia's accession to the WTO is anticipated by a number of countries.

Germany's Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble told Rossiiskaya Gazeta on Tuesday that Russia should become a WTO member "in order to equalize the rights and duties of all market players during export-import operations."

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