

Medvedev Asks U.S. to Ditch Travel Visas

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President Dmitry Medvedev has jumped onto the visa-free travel bandwagon, with his top foreign policy adviser declaring that the Kremlin sent a proposal to cancel visas to the White House before last week's surprise announcement by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

But analysts warned that the country was nowhere near meeting the U.S. Visa Waiver Program's stringent requirements and speculated that the Russian initiative reflected frustration over ongoing talks for visa-free travel with Europe.

Kremlin foreign policy chief Sergei Prikhodko told reporters Friday that Medvedev had called for an end to visas before Putin brought it up during talks with Vice President Joe Biden on Thursday.

"The idea to introduce visa-free travel with the United States is contained in a message to President Barack Obama sent to Washington a couple of days ago," Prikhodko said,

according to Interfax.

Putin told Biden that abolishing visas would kill old stereotypes in Moscow's relations with Washington.

Biden offered only a lukewarm reaction, saying that it was a good idea but that there was "a big difference" between being president and vice president. Biden, however, also said he and Obama agreed on the need for improved ties.

Prihodko said visa-free travel would be "an important step for developing bilateral ties" and added that Moscow understood that this would be difficult — "regarding political and security viewpoints as well as logistical and technical ones."

The Kremlin has been pushing hard for visa-free travel with European states over the past year, but last week marked the first time that the issue was raised at high-level talks with Washington.

Some analysts wondered whether this reflected Moscow's realization that the talks with Europeans were going nowhere.

"Getting a U.S. visa has gotten somewhat easier in the last 10 years, while getting EU visas has gotten somewhat harder," said Sam Greene with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Members of the Schengen open-border zone, which includes EU members and non-members, have sent mixed messages to Moscow's advances, with opposition coming from Germany and Central European countries but Spain and France arguing for a quick removal.

Greene said the issue is always attractive to Russia's leaders because it is popular with the public.

"Maybe they thought that a little more progress could be made with Washington," he said.

He said while opposition in Europe is largely political, the issue with the United States is much more technical.

As an example, Greene noted that while post-Soviet states like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have joined the U.S. Visa Waiver Program, Poland, arguably one of Washington's staunchest allies in Europe, has not.

Set up in 1986, the Visa Waiver Program allows travelers to stay up to 90 days without a visa.

According to the State Department's [web site](#), the program currently has 36 participating states, ranging from Australia to Switzerland.

To be admitted, a country must meet requirements like law enforcement data sharing with the United States, timely reporting of lost and stolen passports and high counter-terrorism, border control and document security standards.

In addition, admittance is at the discretion of the U.S. government and meeting the requirements does not guarantee a successful candidacy, the State Department says.

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