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No More Police Fines for Incorrect Registration Papers

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Police will no longer be allowed to collect fines from foreigners with invalid or missing registration papers, according to a bill aimed at easing registration rules that was approved by the Federation Council on Wednesday.

Instead, the party that issued the foreigner's visa invitation will be held responsible for violations.

"The bill stipulates that the inviting party, usually the employer, is responsible for any such violation," said Vladimir Kobzev, head of the legal department of the Russo-German Chamber of Commerce.

He said employers should inform their foreign staff to always carry valid registration to avoid fines being slapped on the company, which can be as high as 500,000 rubles ($17,500).

The hitherto little-publicized detail in the registration legislation is supposed to reduce extortion, "because a police officer can no longer demand money directly on the street," Kobzev said.

The main thrust of the bill is to ease registration rules by lengthening the period foreigners can be in the country without notifying authorities, from three to seven working days. It also abolishes a recent reform requiring landlords to register foreign tenants at their factual addresses, reinstating the previous rule of registering at the employers' address.

The amendment was initiated after foreign businesses complained about the new rules, which came into effect Feb. 15, because many landlords refused to comply with them.

The State Duma swiftly approved the changes last Friday, and a senator's aide said Wednesday that there was a good chance that the bill would come into effect by the end of the month.

"The bill was passed and sent to the Kremlin today," said an aide to Federation Council Senator Alexei Alexandrov, who oversaw the vote Wednesday.

The aide, who refused to give his name, said it was likely that President Dmitry Medvedev would sign the bill into law before March 31.

Asked when Medvedev would sign the law, a Kremlin spokeswoman promised to look into the matter but did not reply as of late Wednesday.

Kobzev said he was impressed by the unusual speed of the bill's passage. "This is amazing efficiency by our lawmakers," he said by e-mail.

Experts said that while immigration authorities in Moscow have shown flexibility in dealing with last month's registration reform, there has been considerable confusion in the regions.

"We had a lot of problems in St. Petersburg, where authorities demanded landlords' passports and other unnecessary documents for registration," said Alexei Filippenkov of the Visa Delight agency, who also chairs the migration committee at the Association of European Businesses.

His frustration was echoed by Christopher Gilbert, head of the Russo-British Chamber of Commerce.

"It seems there is a mismatch between the documents demanded centrally from the Federal Migration Service and regional branches," he said by telephone. "There are many examples where regional authorities ask for documents that are actually not necessary. The further you go from the capital, the less coherent it becomes."

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