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5-Year Visas Planned

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A new visa agreement between Russia and Europe's Schengen zone could significantly reduce red tape and travel restrictions by next year — but only for professionals, not tourists, a European diplomat said Thursday.

The deal could cover lawmakers, businessmen, journalists, members of central and regional governments — along with their families — and representatives of nongovernmental organizations, said Denis Daniilidis, spokesman for the EU delegation to Moscow.

Athletes, students and scientists may also be included, on the condition that they had received one-year visas twice before, he added.

All of them could be entitled to five-year multiple entry visas, Daniilidis told The Moscow Times. He stressed that the new rules only cover short-term stays, usually defined by up to 90 days.

The agreement, which would be strictly based on reciprocity, granting equal visa

opportunities to Russians and citizens of Schengen member states, could be signed by the end of the year, Daniilidis said by telephone.

A signing would mark a rare and much-needed success in the long and cumbersome negotiations between Moscow and the 27-member block.

It would also follow a similar EU-Russia agreement that came into force in 2007 and limited the times and fees for visa processing.

The latest round of talks started after Spain pushed for the abolition of visa requirements in January 2010.

The Spanish initiative was quickly and warmly embraced in Moscow, with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov repeatedly saying visas could be abolished right away. But it was soon stalled as other EU members made it clear that they did not want to grant Russia visa-free travel, quoting both technical requirements and overtly political arguments.

The result has been a deepening rift between members of the Schengen agreement, an open-border zone of 25 European states, including non-EU countries Switzerland, Norway and Iceland, but not union members Britain, Ireland, Romania, Bulgaria and Cyprus.

The five-year visa deal was negotiated parallel to ongoing talks about total visa abolishment. Russia and the EU plan to approve soon a set of so-called common steps toward scrapping visas, though the deal, expected to be signed at next week's EU-Russia summit in Nizhny Novgorod, was postponed.

Daniilidis said the holdup was merely technical.

"It's not an issue of substance, it's an issue of procedure," he said, adding that the signing was "only a matter of some weeks."

The common steps document is a list of commitments both sides have to fulfill, with no binding time frame.

Requirements include forgery-proof passports, tighter border controls and free movement throughout the host country.

The last point reflects Europeans' frustration with Russia's cumbersome registration requirements for foreigners.

Those rules were eased this spring by introducing a seven-day waiver period for registration of foreigners traveling in Russia, but EU officials have made it clear that they want the rules totally scrapped.

The Federal Migration Service also recently announced the introduction of new biometric passports that contain a microchip with fingerprint data.

Service head Konstantin Romodanovsky told Kommersant last week that the new generation of passport would soon be issued in St. Petersburg. Nationwide distribution is planned to begin in 2013, he said.

But visa requirements are not expected to be eliminated any time soon, especially since the political popularity of open borders has recently dropped in some member states of the Schengen agreement, the rules of which can only be changed by unanimous approval of all participating states.

Denmark said last month that it would reintroduce border controls by the end of the year, arguing that cross-border crime has increased.

Notably, the country's Justice Minister Lars Barfoed said the move was aimed at shutting out "Eastern European criminals."

Alexander Rahr, an analyst with the German Council of Foreign Relations, warned that the clash over visa rules would fuel accusations that Europe is being divided again.

It would take years to overcome political opposition to abolishing visas in Europe, he added.

"My feeling is that visas won't be scrapped before the 2018 Football World Cup," which will be held in Russia, Rahr said by telephone.

Meanwhile, countries like France, Italy and Finland have followed Spain's example of employing the most liberal policies possible under the Schengen agreement when issuing visas to Russian tourists.

Those policies already include routinely giving five-year multiple entry visas to applicants who have held two Schengen visas before.

But other countries, notably Germany, are far more restrictive and demand more documents and personal interviews from applicants.

These discrepancies give Russian travelers an extra incentive to get their Schengen visas from those countries that offer the easiest point of entry — in violation of the spirit of the agreement.

"They travel to Finland by train, have a coffee in Helsinki, before flying to Germany," one senior European diplomat said upon condition of anonymity, citing the sensitivity of the matter.

But European officials also point out that such unilateral steps by European states are not matched by Moscow.

EU delegation spokesman Daniilidis said that while 40 percent of all visas from Schengen members to Russian citizens were multiple entry, "I very much doubt that the Russian side issues that many multiple entry visas."

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