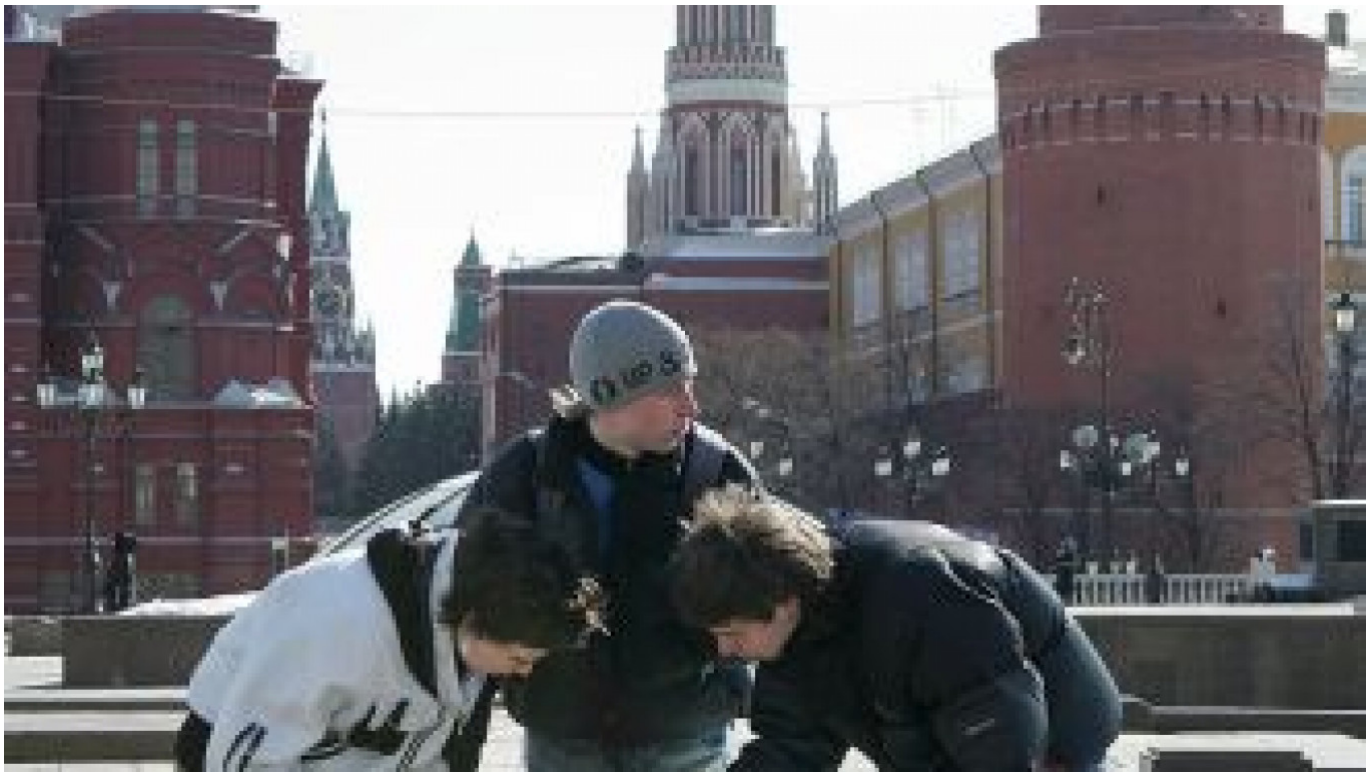
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Visas, Red Tape Causing Tourism Slump

By Lena Smirnova

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Some visitors are finding their way to Red Square but tourism is way down. **Igor Tabakov**

The flow of tourists to Russia is declining this year, tourism industry representatives announced at a news conference on Wednesday.

The decline is all the more alarming because it affects countries that traditionally send the greatest number of tourists to Russia.

Tourism experts blamed difficult visa processes and lack of government support for the trend.

The Russian Tourism Industry Union has sent a letter to the Foreign Ministry with the proposal to create a working group with government and industry representatives.

"We want to talk about problems that don't require a lot of state investment but demand only the coordination of actions by the different ministries, departments, businesses," said Yury Barzikin, the union's vice president.

The number of tourists from Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, France, Austria

and Norway fell up to 24 percent in the first quarter of 2011 as compared with the same period in 2010, according to the State Statistics Service. Meanwhile, the number of Russians going to those countries increased.

Almost all of the operators surveyed by the Tourism Industry Union listed high visa prices and the complexity of visa acquisition as the main barriers to incoming tourism.
The "humiliating" registration requirements for foreigners, signs in the Cyrillic alphabet and the lack of modern transport also dampen tourism, said union presidium member Irina Tyurina.

Recent government actions have only made the problem worse, tourism representatives said.

Russian visa centers opened in Spain in the beginning of 2011, after which Spanish tour operators' accreditation in Russian consulates was revoked, and they were forced to wait in line at the visa centers. The time for processing Russian visas has now increased to 8 to 21 days from 3 to 10 days, while Spanish visas can still be processed in 4 to 5 days.

Moscow hotels are only filled 30 to 40 percent at the end of the summer because there are no major exhibitions at that time and there are not enough tourists who go to the city on personal vacations, said Sergei Voitovich, general director of tour operator Svoi TT.

"If there is a fly flying in Rubin [Hotel's] reception, you can hear it buzz from the top floor," Voitovich said.

Moscow hotels are deciding now how much to lower their prices in July and August, but experts say businesses don't have the resources to increase the flow of tourism to Russia single-handedly.

"Tour operators don't have the financial capacity to develop the country's tourism," Tyurina said. "This is a task for the government. The government must promote its tourism product."

Industry representatives urged the government to allow electronic visa applications, copy the European model of multi-entry visas, decrease visa prices and advertise Russian tourism opportunities abroad.

In the meantime, Russia can be satisfied with the increase in the number of tourists from Iran. Aeroflot's flights from Iran have had solid bookings this year, and two extra charter flights were added — although Voitovich said this is likely because the Iranian's choice of state-approved destinations only includes Russia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

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