

Bid to Ease Visa Rules Creates a New Hassle

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While U.S. and Russian diplomats promised this week to ease visa rules, travelers on the ground have found that attempts to improve the process have resulted in new headaches.

On July 1, the Foreign Ministry opened a new [web site](#) for U.S. and British citizens seeking Russian visas. Applicants seeking to avoid paperwork soon discovered, however, that the site is near dysfunctional, often crashing and taking more than an hour to process applications.

"At the moment, we are told the web site is under construction," Andrei Basmanov, head of the Russian Embassy's consular division in London, said by telephone Thursday.

He could not say how long it will take to fix the site, because the task is handled by the Foreign Ministry's central office in Moscow. The ministry's press office was not available for comment.

The online form was to become the only method for Americans applying for a Russian visa, but consulate officials in the United States will be accepting paper applications until the problem is resolved, Basmanov said.

A bilateral deal to introduce three-year multiple-entry visas for several categories of travelers, including businesspeople and tourists, was announced as finalized during Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's trip to Washington on Wednesday. It is still expected to be sealed this year, together with a similar agreement on five-year visas between Russia and France that could open the door to Schengen countries for Russians.

As for online visa forms, British citizens have used them since 2009, but the initial system was replaced in July by the same one introduced for Americans — and plagued by the same problems.

With the new form, it takes more than 90 minutes to process a single application, said Iveta Kalvisa, a consultant with the Baltic Travel Company in London, a tour operator that assists clients with visa applications to Eastern European countries and Russia.

"We've been getting a lot of complaints," Kalvisa said by telephone. "But we can't help anyone with technical support. We can only suggest that people wait until the web site is functional, and that is frustrating."

The Russian consulate has had to bring back the old application form, Kalvisa said. Basmanov said it was only temporary.

It remained unclear whether the new form would be introduced for other countries. Russian embassies in Australia and New Zealand say nothing about a new visa application system on their web sites.

"It's not just our clients who are outraged," said Gamilia Akhadova, a travel sales executive at the Russian National Group, which provides visa support in Russian consulates in the United States and in the Foreign Ministry in Moscow. "We have to deal with this too."

On Thursday, the web site worked for most of the day, but on Wednesday it was completely down, Akhadova said.

"There is always something wrong with it," she said.

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