

U.S. Assures Visas Won't Grow Hard to Secure

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The U.S. Embassy offered assurances Wednesday that a planned visa facilitation agreement between Washington and Moscow will not lead to more visa refusals for Russians.

"The agreement does not change immigration law," a spokeswoman told The Moscow Times, requesting anonymity in line with embassy policy.

The agreement, which was finalized by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last month, stipulates that both countries will issue three-year multiple-entry visas as a rule to both business travelers and tourists, according to a State Department fact [sheet](#).

But the reform has not gone into force because it still has to be approved by Moscow. "[It] is going through the Russian government's interagency process and will go into effect through a simple exchange of diplomatic notes sometime in the fall," the spokeswoman said by e-

mail.

It was not immediately clear how long the process in Moscow would last. Repeated calls to the Foreign Ministry went unanswered Wednesday.

Kenneth White, a Los Angeles-based immigration lawyer, warned that the agreement's implementation might be seriously jeopardized by recent "backward steps" in U.S. policy for issuing visas to tourists and business travelers.

In a letter to U.S. Ambassador John Beyrle, White pointed out that the refusal rate for Russians applying for U.S. visas doubled last year.

"Rather than moving in the direction of visa-free travel — as proposed by Prime Minister [Vladimir] Putin in March during Vice President [Joe] Biden's visit — the U.S. is moving in the opposite direction," the lawyer said in the letter, a copy of which was seen by The Moscow Times.

According to statistics published on the State Department's web site, 10.1 percent of visa applications for tourists and business people were rejected [last year](#), more than double the 4.9 percent [in 2009](#).

But the current numbers still compare favorably with other former Soviet republics like Georgia, which had a 43 percent rejection rate in 2010; Ukraine, which had a rejection rate of 31 percent; and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, whose rates ranged from 29 percent to 34 percent.

The Russian rejection rate fell from 15 percent in 2006 to 7.5 percent in 2008, according to U.S. figures.

The embassy spokeswoman rejected the notion that it was getting harder to obtain U.S. visas, saying her mission "prides itself on the speed, courtesy and fairness of its visa processing."

"The vast majority of applicants receive two-year multiple-entry visas in a matter of days," she said.

Russia's relatively low rejection rate probably reflects the fact that a high number of applications are handled by agencies rather than the applicants themselves, experts said.

Since Aug. 1, Russian applicants can complete applications on the Ustraveldocs.com web site instead of sending them by the Pony Express courier service.

But visa agencies say they do not expect a drop in business. "Most of our clients come to us because they either understand too little English or cannot manage the online application form," said Olga Borovkova, deputy director of American Travel, a Moscow-based agency specializing in U.S. and Canadian visas.

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