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Eyeing Visas, Ireland to Sign Pact on Partnership

By Andrew McChesney

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Ireland and Russia will sign a declaration on a partnership for modernization Monday as Irish Deputy Prime Minister Eamon Gilmore visits Moscow with an eye on easing visa rules for Russian businesspeople and working more closely with Skolkovo.

Gilmore, who also serves as foreign minister, is to sign the deal, based on a partnership agreed upon between Russia and the European Union last year, with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at noon Monday.

"It will commit both countries to work together to modernize how we work in agriculture, industry, public services, and across a whole range of economic and social areas," Gilmore said in an interview late Sunday.

Gilmore on Monday will also co-chair with Deputy Transportation Minister Valery Okulov a joint economic commission between Ireland and Russia, a grouping that some in the Irish

business community said has been neglected in recent years.

"The main result that I would hope to get [out of Gilmore's visit] is that the joint economic commission will get back to working in a productive fashion," said Constantin Gurdgiev, chairman of the Ireland Russia Business Association and co-author of a report submitted to Gilmore late last month on how Ireland could expand economic ties with Russia.

At the top of its list of recommendations, the report urged Gilmore to strive for eased visa requirements.

"We are easing visa restrictions," Gilmore said in the interview, speaking in the living room of the Irish ambassador's residence. "We have recently made changes in our visa arrangements whereby Russian citizens who secure a visa to visit the United Kingdom can use that visit to continue their travel to Ireland. We are doing that on a pilot basis, and we hope to be able to extend and to continue that."

He said Ireland was also reviewing its visa arrangements with a view to making it easier for Russian citizens and citizens of other countries who want to do business in Ireland to secure visas.

"We are actively working on new, improved visa arrangements. Our Justice Department, which is responsible for our visa regime, will be putting proposals to the government in the near future about new visa arrangements," he said.

Gilmore said he expected the joint economic commission on Monday to pinpoint areas where the two countries could boost trade, which he said reached 2 billion euros ($2.76 billion) last year and is expected to grow more this year.

Gilmore also will meet with the leaders of Irish companies working in Russia — he said there are about 200 — and launch the "Education in Ireland" brand, a government campaign to attract Russian students by marketing Ireland's reputation as a friendly, safe country.

Gurdgiev praised Gilmore's trip as a harbinger of better relations, noting that it was coming at a time when Ireland's economy has been battered by the EU financial crisis. Dublin on Friday unveiled 12.4 billion euros in austerity measures over the next four years, Reuters reported.

"The fact that the deputy prime minister is traveling to Russia and the [joint economic] commission is meeting is very positive because the priority now is domestic, but we are traveling to Russia," Gurdgiev said.

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