

No Road Map on EU Visa Deal

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov put a damper Thursday on hopes that an agreement on lifting cumbersome visa requirements between Russia and the European Union would be reached anytime soon.

Following a meeting with EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, Lavrov stood firm in insisting that negotiations on scrapping the visa regime can only begin when a so-called common steps agreement on what requirements are needed has been fulfilled.

Lavrov and Ashton told reporters in Moscow that they hoped an agreement will be sealed at a summit in Brussels next month, but Lavrov's comments suggested that the two sides were still far apart.

"We agreed that once all those common steps are implemented, we'll start negotiating an agreement for a visa-free regime," he was quoted as saying by Interfax.

In one concession, Lavrov indicated that Moscow has dropped its demand for a road map with

a clear time frame. A senior diplomat had said earlier Thursday that Moscow won't sign any agreement if not given a road map.

"Without a clearly defined perspective, we won't agree," ambassador-at-large Anvar Azimov told Interfax.

But EU officials have been adamant that Moscow first has to meet a large number of conditions before setting a time limit.

"There cannot be an automatism," Soren Liborius, spokesman for the EU delegation to Russia, told The Moscow Times.

He stressed that the common steps would be a "long list" of conditions that would have to be met by both sides.

The conditions have not been published, but officials have said they will range from technical issues like biometrical passports and secure outer borders, to legislative ones like asylum policy agreements ensuring that illegal migrants can be readmitted to their last host country.

"That's where the real work has to be done," Liborius said.

Visa policy gained salience in relations with Europe after Spain launched an initiative last year to liberalize travel restrictions with Russia. The Kremlin subsequently pushed Brussels on the issue, and Lavrov has said regularly that Moscow is ready to abolish visas "tomorrow."

The European Union, on the other hand, has been split on the issue.

A group of countries that profit from Russian tourism, like Spain and Finland, say visa requirements should be scrapped quickly, while others warn that Europe would be swamped with illegal immigrants. Lawmakers from countries like Germany and the Baltic states have argued that Moscow should not be rewarded with visa-free travel without making concessions.

They have also said it would send a wrong signal to countries like Ukraine and Georgia if their negotiations with the EU on visa-free travel are overtaken by those with Russia.

On top of that, EU members are implementing vastly differing policies for Russian visa applicants. Consulates for Italy, Spain, France and Finland often give multiple-entry visas for up to five years to those who have been given visas before.

Czech and German consulates, on the other hand, are far more restrictive, according to official EU statistics, quoted by the euobserver.com [web site](#) earlier this fall.

That situation causes considerable embarrassment to the 28-member bloc because visa applicants can "shop around" and choose the easiest country for entry.

The visa talks do not affect Britain and Ireland, which are not part of the Schengen group of states that have given the EU a mandate to negotiate with Moscow on their behalf. The Schengen group also includes non-EU members like Switzerland and Iceland.

However, the governments of Poland and Germany have recently softened their stance. Foreign Ministers Radek Sikorski and Guido Westerwelle have sent a letter to Ashton, the EU's foreign policy chief, in which they call for more dialogue in relations with Russia, German media reported last week.

The ministers also argue that visa rules should be eased because personal contacts between Europeans and Russians play a major role in fostering democracy and rule of law in Russia, a German foreign ministry spokeswoman said by e-mail.

"Both sides must work together so that visa rules do not stand in the way to such contacts," the spokeswoman said, requesting anonymity because she was not authorized to speak on the record.

Philipp Missfelder, a member of Chancellor Merkel's Christian Democratic Party who sits in the Bundestag's foreign relations committee, said personal exchanges were vital to Germany's economic interests.

"What we need is a culture in which tourists, businesspeople and students feel that they are welcome in Germany," he said in e-mailed comments.

Similar arguments were also made by a high-ranking German business delegation during talks with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin earlier this week.

Eckhard Cordes, CEO of retail and wholesale giant Metro AG, who led the delegation, said he would continue to plead for abolishing visas between EU and Eastern European countries.

But he also called on Russia to make visa applications and registration requirements easier, according to a [statement](#) on the Committee on Eastern European Relations, which he chairs.

Putin [told](#) the delegation that visas were "barriers to business" and pointed out that in some cases, business deals fell through because of formal mistakes in executives' visa applications.

Still, he stopped short of promising any changes.

Some have argued that implementing border security standards like those in place with Romania and Serbia, would be complicated, requiring the inspection of Russia's vast borders with China and Mongolia.

They also say Russian elites do not need visa-free travel, as most big businessmen already have them and government officials rarely need visas.

Marko Mihkelson, an Estonian lawmaker and member of his county's parliament's foreign relations committee, said he saw little need for an imminent fix.

In a telephone interview from Tallinn, he argued that the current visa system was working quite well. "We are seeing a more than 50 percent increase of applications for Schengen visas from Russians over the past year. A big number of them get long-term multiple-entry visas. So where is the problem?" he said.

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