

# U.S. Visa Deal May Be Set for New Year

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A long-awaited visa agreement between Russia and the United States will hopefully be ratified before the New Year's holiday, although it will have to wait until after a State Duma is voted into office, U.S. Embassy officials said Monday.

"We hope for a fairly speedy ratification with mid-December as a goal," a senior consular official said in a telephone interview.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with embassy policy, also confirmed that the agreement would have to be approved by both houses of parliament, the Duma and the Federation Council.

But the official said Foreign Ministry officials had told their U.S. colleagues that ratification should be completed by the end of the year and pointed out that Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had promised in July that the agreement would be in force before "Catholic Christmas," which is on Dec. 25.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Vavilov referred all questions regarding ratification to parliament.

Andrei Klimov, a deputy chairman of the Duma's foreign relations committee, confirmed that lawmakers will not look into the agreement before the Dec. 4 parliamentary elections.

"There is too little time left," he said, adding that once initiated, ratification would probably require two weeks.

The agreement stipulates that standard visas granted to both Russians and Americans will be now be valid for three years and allow multiple entries. The embassy official said those seeking both tourist and business visas will no longer have to provide written invitations from the host country's citizens.

"Documentation requirements will be dramatically changed," the official said, calling the agreement "historic."

The agreement will go into effect 30 days after both parties exchange another set of notes following ratification, according to a White House Fact Sheet [published](#) on the State Department's web site.

The ratification issue was not mentioned on earlier fact sheets, but the embassy official said it was clear from the onset that it would be required. But under U.S. law, the agreement will not require ratification by Congress because it is not classified as an international treaty.

The European Union and Russia are also discussing a facilitation agreement that would make it much easier for businessmen, journalists, NGO members, lawmakers and governments officials to obtain short-term visas.

Talks have been ongoing since last summer, when officials said an agreement might be reached by the end of the year.

EU delegation spokesman Soren Liborius said in an e-mail Monday that it was impossible to say before a final negotiation round is set whether a deal would be reached at the December EU-Russia summit. Further negotiations could start early next month.

At the summit, expected to take place in Brussels on Dec. 15, both sides plan to start a program toward totally abolishing visas.

The so-called common steps consist of more than 40 conditions that must be met before visa negotiations can begin. Moscow's EU ambassador Vladimir Chizhov said last week that those conditions could be completed "in one or 1 1/2 years."

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