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U.S. Visa Deal Hits a Snag in New Duma

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The timeline for final ratification of the much-anticipated visa agreement with the United States has been put into doubt by new political realities in the State Duma, with the signing likely postponed for months, a senior legislator said Tuesday.

"We now have another consideration in the parliament, as we have many more Communists and other leftist politicians who are not very close friends of the United States," said Andrei Klimov, deputy chairman of the Duma's foreign relations committee.

"It is very difficult for me to say, just now, what will be the incoming Duma's priorities," Klimov said by telephone.

Officials at the Russian Foreign Ministry and the U.S. State Department had been hopeful that a deal to greatly loosen visa restrictions would be quickly passed by both the Duma and the Federation Council before the end of the year.

But the results of the contested Duma vote on Dec. 4 — which left the ruling United Russia

party with far fewer seats in parliament and boosted the standing of several opposition parties — have greatly complicated matters.

In a best-case scenario, Klimov said he did not anticipate a resolution before "the first part of the coming year," but was not optimistic that even that would come to pass.

"We still have to organize our special committees, which may take about a month, so we will only be able to begin discussing our agenda after the end of January at the earliest," he said. "Maybe the visa question will be included, but at this point I cannot say what will happen."

The U.S. Embassy in Moscow and the Russian Foreign Ministry did not respond to calls for comment.

The agreement on the table would grant both Russians and Americans standard three-year, multiple-entry visas with far less paperwork than is currently required for tourist and business visas.

Russia has also been working on a similar easing of visa restrictions with the European Union.

Klimov, who represents United Russia, said he hoped the new Duma would take a positive view on "opening the world for our compatriots," calling it a matter of "human rights."

Germany will ease its visa controls next year, its foreign minister said on Tuesday, in a move expected to help thousands from Russia and China seeking to do business there.

"I am pushing for a liberal visa policy that reflects Germany's role in a globalized world," Guido Westerwelle said.

The new rules will speed up the visa process by demanding fewer documents, making forms available on the Internet and halting the requirement that all applicants appear in person.

(Reuters)

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