

Visa Pact With U.S. Stuck in Holding Pattern

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A major visa facilitation agreement with the United States is likely to be held up in the State Duma until early next year, a senior United Russia deputy said Tuesday.

Lawmakers will "most probably" not consider ratification before the U.S. presidential election, Andrei Klimov, a first deputy chairman of the Duma's International Relations Committee, told The Moscow Times.

His comments deal a blow to a much-touted United States initiative that would have introduced one of the most liberal regimes Russia has with a visa-requiring country.

The agreement stipulates that a multiple-entry visa valid for three years will be standard for both Russians and Americans traveling as tourists or on business. The maximum stay allowed on each entry is six months.

The agreement also does away with the cumbersome requirement of an invitation from a host-country citizen.

Announced by then-U.S. Ambassador John Beyrle in June, the bilateral agreement was finalized in November when Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton formally exchanged notes.

Lavrov had promised that the deal would come into force by Christmas.

But while the agreement can simply become law in the United States, Russia requires ratification in both houses of parliament.

Klimov said the Duma definitely will not consider it before May 7, which is the date of Vladimir Putin's inauguration as president.

"There will be new ministers and possibly even a new head of the Foreign Ministry," Klimov said.

But he added that deputies are likely to delay ratification even further pending the outcome of the U.S. presidential election in November.

"It will practically be like that. [President Barack] Obama has done good things, but he has not been re-elected yet," Klimov said.

He suggested that lawmakers wish to wait and see the makeup of the new U.S. administration, which will take office in January.

The visa issue would have to take a backseat to other bilateral issues with Washington, such as missile defense and disarmament, Klimov said.

"It is a good and important issue but not the most important. We need to move on further with other problems first," he said.

Calls to the Foreign Ministry went unanswered Tuesday. A U.S. Embassy spokesman said he had no comment.

The Duma's obstinacy on U.S. visas contrasts with the broader policy of calling to scrap visa requirements with other countries, especially in Europe.

Long-standing talks with the European Union on the issue restarted last week, when experts from both sides initiated discussion of the "common steps" program approved at an EU-Russia summit in December.

Anvar Azimov, the Foreign Ministry official at the talks, said afterward that Moscow expects to fulfill the tasks laid down in the common steps either by the end of this year or by mid-2013.

Visa-free travel with most of the EU should be introduced in 2014, the year of the Sochi Winter Olympics, Azimov told Kommersant in an interview published Monday.

But EU officials quickly cautioned that although the talks were constructive, they included no

set timeline.

"There is far too much emphasis on numbers and years than on content," said Soren Liborius, the spokesman for the EU delegation in Moscow.

The common steps consist of more than 40 conditions that must be met by both sides, including safe travel documents, readmission of illegal migrants and cooperation on border security databases.

EU members have responded differently to Moscow's demands. Some cite immigration and security concerns, while others press for opening borders for tourism and business.

The latter give long-term multiple-entry visas to second-time applicants, making it attractive for Russians to apply for a visa from countries like Finland and Spain for traveling inside the 26-member Schengen Zone.

Experts say interests remain divergent because the 1.5 million EU citizens who travel to Russia each year are a tiny minority among European travelers, whereas the 2.5 million Russians visiting Europe annually account for a substantial share of Russians' travel abroad.

Hannes Swoboda, the European Parliament's rapporteur for Russia, said Tuesday that the process was definitely too slow.

"It is a contradiction when on the one hand we plead for more openness in politics and society and on the other we are so hesitant on opening borders," the Austrian lawmaker told reporters Tuesday.

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