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Report: EU Visa Agreement Held Up by 'Official' Passport Holders Argument

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An agreement between Russia and the European Union to ease visa requirements for travel between the EU and Russia is being delayed due to a lack of consensus on the issue of granting visa-less entry to holders of so-called "official" passports, a Kommersant report said Wednesday.

The two sides are close to completing an agreement that would make five-year multi-entry visas standard for members of official delegations, businessmen, participants of scientific, cultural and sporting events and exchange programs, journalists, and truck and bus drivers with international routes, Kommersant reported. The accord would also make it possible for repeat visa applicants to receive five-year visas.

But completion of the agreement is being held up by EU concerns over Russia's insistence on granting visa-less entry to holders of official passports, which in Russia are given to a range of state employees, including consulate employees, members of the armed forces stationed abroad, federal and regional civil servants, employees of state corporations, and workers at state organizations, including the Central Bank, the presidential administration and the State Duma. There are currently around 15,000 holders of such

passports in Russia, according to official data, Kommersant reported.

An unnamed EU diplomat told the daily that Brussels is concerned that such passports are granted to more people than they are supposed to be.

"Receiving an official passport in Russia, as in the majority of EU countries, is easier than [receiving] a diplomatic one. We have doubts regarding the observance of rules for issuing such documents," the source said.

An unnamed Foreign Ministry source told Kommersant that the issue was "fundamental."

Talks with the EU on the issue of visa rules restarted earlier this month, when experts from both sides initiated discussion of the "common steps" program approved at an EU-Russia summit in December. Visa-free travel with most of the EU should be introduced in 2014, the year of the Sochi Winter Olympics, Foreign Ministry official Anvar Azimov said last week.

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