

New French Consulate Rules Blamed for Visa Headaches

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March 29, 2012

The  Moscow Times

The Russian Tourism Union blasted French consular officials Thursday for failing to issue tourist visas on time, causing numerous disrupted or cancelled voyages and costing local travel agents substantial losses.

Beginning on March 12, France's Consulate General in Moscow tightened rules limiting the period in which a visa application can be submitted to no more than 10 working days before the travel date, union spokeswoman Irina Tyurina told Interfax.

As a result, agencies have only had passports with visas returned to them the night before travel days or even on the day itself — in some cases after their clients have started their journeys, she said.

With the May and summer holidays looming, travel agents have been flooded with hundreds of passports of tourists waiting for visas, which now cannot be sent to the consulate early

because of the new time limits, Tyurina said.

Previously, travel agents were allowed to submit up to 100 applications per day — regardless of the day of travel — enabling them to cope with a backlog by spreading them out over time, Tyurina said.

The Russian Tourism Union sent letters to the French ambassador in Moscow and France's consul general in Russia on Wednesday, asking them to resolve the issue, Tyurina said.

The French Embassy's press counselor, Thomas Buffin, said officials there would "study" the letter and "reply" to it.

He insisted, however, that the new rules were just a "slight technical change" in embassy procedure that did not dramatically affect the issuing of visas.

He said currently the embassy could not accept applications "too early" before the 10-day window because "the consulate is overloaded with work as many Russians are traveling to Paris for May holidays and in the summer."

"Our work is aimed at satisfying the demands of the travel agents and the Russian people willing to visit France," he said.

One travel agent, who spoke on condition of anonymity, complained that the embassy recently returned the passports of 64 clients on their travel day, forcing the agent to send an employee to Minsk by plane to catch up with the travelers aboard a train to give them their passports.

Buffin pointed out that in that case the travel agent had only submitted the 64 applications eight days before the journey.

Another travel agent, who also spoke on condition of anonymity, said it had 14 clients cancel their trips because they could not get their passports back before their day of travel. The travel agent was forced to return the money.

In another episode, the travel agent was forced to pay for five clients who had been delayed by a passport hold-up to go to Berlin by plane to catch up with their group. Buffin said embassy officials were still looking into the second case.

Ahead of the 2006 May holidays, Russian travel agents picketed the French Embassy over its failure to issue about 1,500 visas because its staff went on strike.

In December that year, the embassy stopped issuing visas to those travelling by bus for New Year's after it couldn't cope with the number of applications.

In June 2007, the embassy opened a special French visa center to deal with the growing number of tourists.

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