

Passport Fuss Delays EU Visa Accord

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A new visa facilitation agreement would entitle businessmen, journalists and employees of nongovernmental organizations to multiple-entry European Union visas of up to five years. Above, a Yabloko party demonstration last year in favor of visa-free travel to the EU. **Sergei Porter**

A dispute over passports issued to Russian bureaucrats is holding up an agreement with the European Union that would considerably reduce visa hassles for business travelers and other professionals.

But a senior State Duma lawmaker said the parliament might vote on a much-delayed visa agreement with the United States as early as next week.

The status of official passports is the last unsolved issue in a new visa facilitation agreement with Brussels, an EU diplomat familiar with the negotiations told The Moscow Times.

"Everything else is set," said the diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

The Foreign Ministry has publicly insisted on including official passports in the deal. "For us, this is an important matter of principle," ministry official Anvar Azimov told Interfax last month.

But some EU member states are wary that including these passports might pose security risks, the European diplomat said. One concern is that no one in the Russian government seems to be able to say how many holders of official passports exist.

"There are only estimates that range from 10,000 to 40,000," the EU diplomat said.

Known as "service passports" in Russian, these documents are issued to a wide range of federal and regional state employees working for anything from local legislatures to state corporations. A recent Kommersant article, quoting official figures, put their number at 15,000 holders. Many EU member countries do not have any equivalent for them.

Foreign Ministry spokespeople were unavailable for comment over the extended Russia Day holiday weekend.

The facilitation agreement would entitle businessmen, journalists and employees of nongovernmental organizations to multiple-entry visas of up to five years. Also covered will be scientists, official delegation members and participants in cultural and sports events.

But stays would be limited to three months, and only so-called bona fide applicants would be eligible, which usually means second-time applicants who have not overstayed a previous visa.

Independent of the facilitation agreement, Moscow and Brussels have been talking for years about scrapping visas altogether. Both sides agreed on a list of more than 40 common steps last December, and Moscow has said it would like to see those conditions fulfilled by 2013.

Meanwhile, a similar but wider facilitation agreement with the United States has been scheduled for a first reading in the Duma by the end of July, [according](#) to official documentation on the parliament's website.

The lower house should vote on the bill just before presidents Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama meet for a Group of 20 summit in Mexico on June 18 and 19, according to Andrei Klimov, first deputy chairman of the Duma's International Affairs Committee. "We will try to create a positive atmosphere for them," Klimov said in an interview.

The agreement with the United States envisages that all travelers get three-year multiple-entry visas as a rule.

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