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Under New Visas, Mind the Fine Print

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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U.S. Consul General Doron Bard **Vladimir Filonov**

Those who believe in the U.S.-Russian "reset" despite disheartening rhetoric in both countries recently may want to celebrate on Sunday when a landmark visa agreement comes into force.

But before you put the Champagne bottle on ice, read the fine print carefully.

The agreement makes three-year multiple-entry visas allowing stays of up to six months the standard for both tourists and business travelers from each country. Written invitation requirements, fees and minimum waiting times will be slashed, and visa applications will be handled by any consulate in the world — by and large regardless of an applicant's place of residence.

That's how things should work in theory. What will happen in practice won't be known before Monday, when both countries' consulates start implementing the new rules.

The implementation is more demanding for Moscow because Russian consulates hitherto gave single-entry visas only for the exact travel dates, while U.S. consulates already give two-year multiple-entry visas to most applicants.

Somewhat surprisingly, Russia is opting for a dual system, giving travelers a choice of applying for a visa "old style" or "new style," said a senior Foreign Ministry official.

"The old style will stay in force for one year," said Vadim Sovelev, head of the consular section in the ministry's North America department.

One reason why applicants might opt for the old rules is that they offer little uncertainty. The Foreign Ministry has not yet published its implementation recommendations to consulates.

Observers said this made some of the agreement's effects hard to gauge. "As long as we do not have those recommendations, we have no idea how consulates will handle this," said Yekaterina Elekchyan, an associate with Baker & McKenzie's Moscow office.

Sovelev said that recommendations would be published on consulate websites by Sunday or Monday. But he said that while invitation requirements will be eased for business travelers, the procedure for tourists will remain the same. "They need an invitation from an officially registered tour operator or a hotel reservation," he said.

Written invitations are the main headache for travelers wishing to stay with friends, because the documents are cumbersome to obtain for Russians and impossible to get for most foreigners living in the country. Many visitors opt for tourist companies, which often make fictitious hotel reservations and charge hefty fees.

But Sovelev was adamant that the three-year period stipulated in the agreement would be extended to tourists regardless of the length of their hotel reservations or organized tours. "We are recommending our consulates to act favorably and issue three-year visas," he said.

Business travelers are relieved of the cumbersome requirement to get an official invitation from the Federal Migration Service. Instead they will need to present a written invitation that can come from "any Russian organization or a U.S. organization with official representative offices in Russia," Sovelev said.

He also said tourist and business visa holders must not stay in the country for more than six months — but that they can immediately return after leaving the country. "Theoretically, you can leave for one day," he said.

The reciprocal agreement stipulates that the United States issues three-year visas to business travelers and tourists. While American consulates demand only an online application form and a photo, they say that written invitations can help first-time applicants required to be interviewed by consular officials — in order to show that they won't stay permanently. (Second-time applicants who got their last U.S. visa before 2008 and have not been finger-scanned are not exempt from the interview.)

Americans represent the third-largest group of visitors to Russia from outside the former Soviet Union. According to U.S. Embassy data, 170,000 trips from U.S. citizens were registered

in 2011.

The number of Russians traveling to the United States is significantly higher, with 222,000 visits recorded in 2011, a 27 percent increase over 2010, the U.S. Embassy said.

For this year, U.S. officials expect a more moderate increase — but that nevertheless is on track to set another all-time record. "We are anticipating a modest jump in applicants of some 10 percent," Consul General Doron Bard said in an interview at the U.S. Embassy on Thursday.

Bard said he hopes the agreement will provide an impetus for more change. "I am looking forward for Russia to become a more attractive destination for American business and tourism," he said, adding that the Russian government had a role to play in that.

He also stressed that the agreement should be seen in the light of the reset of bilateral relations, initiated by President Barack Obama when he came to office in 2008.

"The visa agreement is part of the reset and dovetails nicely with" it, he said.

Initialed between Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last summer, the agreement was held up in Moscow bureaucracy for more than a year.

President Vladimir Putin's signing of the agreement on July 28 sent a welcome signal after a series of troubles that started in January, when the new U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul was greeted by harassment and scathing criticism from pro-Kremlin media and youth groups.

Things did not get better after Putin kicked off his new term as president in May by signing a series of laws criticized as repressive by the U.S. State Department. (Before his election, Putin blamed the State Department for huge opposition rallies against his return to power.)

Further straining ties have been efforts by U.S. lawmakers to pass the Magnitsky act, which would blacklist Russians accused of human rights abuses. Moscow has vowed to retaliate over any such law.

Solovev, the Foreign Ministry official, said that the visa agreement was the most liberal that exists with any country that has a visa regime with Russia. And he added that this "breakthrough" should be followed by more. "Our aim is to scrap visas altogether," he said.

While Consul General Bard said that a visa waiver agreement with Russia was not yet on the agenda, he did praise the spirit among U.S. and Russian officials who worked on the agreement. Deputy chief of mission Sheila Gwaltney and Foreign Ministry officials did not pop open a bottle of Champagne when they formalized the agreement last month with an exchange of diplomatic notes, but they will hold a "celebratory lunch" in the near future, he said.

The U.S. Embassy has published an overview of the new rules on its website. The whole agreement might be published after it comes into force next week, an embassy spokeswoman said by e-mail. http://moscow.usembassy.gov/pr_visas-082912.html

The embassy welcomes U.S. citizens to send feedback about their experiences to its citizen

services section at MoscowWarden@state.gov.

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