

St. Pete Volunteers Form Program To Ease Visa Regulations

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A group unhappy about visa barriers has created a project to lobby for eased rules. Above, Muscovites waiting in line at a British visa center in 2011. **Maxim Novikov**

ST. PETERSBURG — "The Russian passport is a curse!"

This bitter exclamation is well-known to just about any Russian who has spent several hours waiting — in all sorts of weather — in seemingly endless, slow-moving lines outside consulates of European countries, carrying thick stacks of documents ranging from bank statements to letters from employers to property ownership deeds.

The sentiments of European residents in need of a Russian visa are no less positive.

Both Russian and European politicians have regularly made optimistic statements about easing visa regulations since at least 2008, but no steps have yet been taken to address the issue.

Now, a new project titled No Visa has been born out of ordinary people's fatigue with the Russian government's failure to handle the issue efficiently and out of hope that a citizens' initiative will help to establish an eased visa regime.

The declared goal of [No Visa](#), which officially began in St. Petersburg on Aug. 31, is information support for the cancellation or easing of visa requirements between Russia and EU countries. The group also acts as a lobby to encourage officials to address the issue.

The project was created in cooperation with the German-Russian Forum in Berlin. At present, No Visa is staffed by 120 volunteers, who work to collect and summarize a range of opinions and specific proposals on eliminating or easing the visa regime between Russia and EU countries.

Through the forum's connections, these proposals will be on the agenda of the annual Russian-German St. Petersburg Dialogue Forum in July.

Diplomats and government organizations have reacted cautiously to the No Visa project. Its presentation on Aug. 31 was ignored by every local consulate representative who had been invited, and no City Hall officials attended the meeting.

"It is certainly not that we were too lazy to invite them," said Darya Bobrovskaya, the project's coordinator. "Some of the diplomats replied that they were too busy to attend a meeting in the middle of a working day, as if we were asking them out for coffee, not a matter of crucial importance, while some officials said that the subject is too sensitive, and they either do not know what to say or are afraid of saying something wrong and irritating their bosses."

The visa issue is indeed a touchy one. The project's volunteers have gathered information about instances in which bureaucracy prevented people from getting a visa, and the group showed a video at the presentation detailing some of these cases.

One such case involved Stefan Bistrich, a young man from Germany who applied for a tourist visa to Russia earlier this year. The invitation issued by his Russian friend was declared invalid by the Russian Consulate on the grounds that the friend resides in Germany.

Pressed for time, Bistrich contacted a German travel agency, which secured a fake invitation from a Russian company. The company said Bistrich was its representative in the CIS. Bistrich received a three-month business visa. The process cost 120 euros, which he paid to the agency.

Although Bistrich got his visa, the experience left a bad taste in his mouth.

"Why on Earth are bureaucrats forcing normal people, who otherwise respect the law and rules, to resort to tricks that they are embarrassed or ashamed about deep at heart?" he asked. "Would it not be easier to simplify the procedure? In the end, a lot of people end up traveling with visas issued with fake invitations."

Travel agencies that provide invitations to foreigners are plentiful, and not only in Germany.

"Most professors and teachers whom we invite to give lectures prefer to get their visas via

such travel agencies because it is easier," said Yelena Belokurova, a professor at the Center for European and German Studies at St. Petersburg State University. "Although they come here to teach, they get tourist visas through these agencies.

"Even creating an official invitation for these professors is a lot of hassle," Belokurova said. "You have to collect several signatures at the university alone, and then their personal presence is required at the consulate, both at the time of application and at the time of collection. Many professors would need to travel far from their small towns for these appointments at the consulates."

Bobrovskaya said that part of the problem is the current visa regime provides financial benefits to certain parties involved in securing people visas, including such tourist agencies.

"To achieve political solutions, the first thing that is required is to call things what they really are," Bobrovskaya said. "The visa issue has become a lucrative and highly profitable field for all sorts of parasites these days."

Christoph Hoerstel, head of the visa working group at the German-Russian Forum in Berlin, said Russia and EU travelers sometimes use loopholes to avoid dealing with cumbersome visa rules. For instance, he said, the easiest way for a St. Petersburg resident to get to Germany is by applying for a Schengen visa at the Finnish Consulate, which requests far fewer documents.

"The Consulate of Finland issues three times as many visas as the German Consulate, and this is hardly surprising considering the impressive difference in the list of documents that is required for application," he said. "The Schengen requirements are standard for all countries in the agreement, but a lot depends on a particular state's interpretation of them, and even on the attitude of a particular clerk."

In the spring, Hoerstel and his counterparts asked the German parliament to make public the contents of a document signed by Russia and the EU at the end of 2011 in which a long list of specific steps essential for reaching visa-free travel was outlined. The appeal has so far gone unanswered.

Yet Hoerstel is not discouraged. He thinks that progress on the visa issue is tangible.

"One serious indicator is this: When my group was beginning its work, politicians referred to 2018 as the possible date for the start of visa-free travel, and now most people are talking about 2014," he said. "This is a clear sign of a crucial change in the mindset of politicians."

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