

Envoy Says EU Linking Visa-Free Travel to Human Rights

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A senior diplomat complained Thursday that the European Union was trying to politicize talks on visa-free travel by linking the issue to Russia's human rights record.

Anvar Azimov, who serves as Russia's point man on visas with the EU, said progress has been made to fulfill a checklist of issues that must be decided before talks on visa-free travel can start in earnest.

But efforts by some EU member states to "politicize" the process meant that Russia might not meet its goal of achieving visa-free travel by 2014, he said.

"Our colleagues in the EU have tried to politicize this document, linking this process with the human rights situation in Russia," Azimov, an ambassador-at-large with the Foreign Ministry, told reporters. "We disagree with this."

EU lawmakers have voiced concern about a recent Kremlin crackdown on dissent, including the adoption of restrictive rules on rallies, NGOs and the Internet.

Azimov expressed hope, however, that visa-free travel could still become a reality by the 2014 Winter Olympics.

"Ideally, it should happen before the Olympic Games in Sochi," he said, according to Interfax.

He added that the EU had no reason to fear an inflow of migrants.

The Kremlin has pushed for eased visa rules with the EU for some time. But the EU, which needs a consensus among all 27 member states, has insisted that Russia first fulfill a list of requirements on matters like biometric passports and border control before negotiations can begin.

In the meantime, Russia and the United States drastically eased visa requirements this month after two years of U.S.-initiated negotiations. The new rules, which came into force Sept. 9, allow the automatic issuance of three-year visas for businesspeople and tourists, among other things.

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