

EU Visa Deal Looks Likely, But Catches Remain

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Stefano Manservigi, the EU's director general for home affairs.

A much-touted agreement with the European Union making travel easier for businesspeople, students, NGO workers and other professionals might go into force finally, as Brussels has changed its stance on Moscow's demand to include a visa waiver for government officials.

But there are some catches, as both sides still face difficult negotiations before reaching a visa-facilitation agreement, a senior EU official said Monday.

Moscow must ensure that it issues so-called official passports with biometric security features only to certain people, Stefano Manservigi, the EU's director general for home affairs, told reporters in Moscow.

Manservigi added that fresh complications might arise over a new Russian law that requires airlines to pass passenger data to the country's law enforcement agencies, even if they only

fly through Russian airspace. He explained that this might be in violation of current EU law.

The visa-facilitation agreement, which grants long-term multiple-entry visas to businesspeople, NGO workers, scientists, students and journalists, has been held up for more than one year because EU negotiators stubbornly refused to meet Moscow's demand to grant holders of official passports visa-free entry.

They have pointed to security concerns, arguing that there is no transparent data about who is entitled to such passports.

However, the impasse was solved last week, reportedly after Germany lifted its reservations. A German Foreign Ministry spokeswoman confirmed at a briefing last week that Berlin had sent a letter to Brussels in which it proposed to accept the Russian demand, according to a transcript e-mailed to The Moscow Times on Monday.

The policy change has startled experts and rights activists because it contradicts Germany's hitherto strict position on visa matters. In a parallel announcement, Berlin said last week that it would veto the inclusion of Romania and Bulgaria into the Schengen border-free zone because of security concerns.

Experts suggested that Germany's business lobby was behind the decision and warned that it would be perceived as unfair. "It gives privileges to certain groups of people," said Frazer Cameron, director of the EU-Russia Center, a Brussels-based think tank. Cameron added that the EU risks putting off neighbor states like Ukraine and Moldova, which were recently granted visa-facilitation agreements after they unilaterally abolished visas for EU citizens, something Moscow has not done.

Manservisi said Monday that he could not comment on which country prompted the change, but pointed out that any decision at the visa negotiations, which he oversees, is subject to a qualified majority. "We recently arrived at a point where we are ready to discuss the inclusion of holders of Russian official passports," he said.

The EU official explained that there were some 180,000 holders, including soldiers and staff of the country's sprawling state corporations, such as Gazprom and Russian Technologies. "This needs to be reduced to a meaningful number," he said, adding that soldiers and state corporation workers needed to be excluded.

The Foreign Ministry has said it is ready to limit the number of eligible passport holders to those issued documents with biometric security features. It has given their number at 15,000.

It was unclear Monday whether Moscow had already issued biometric passports to persons deemed unacceptable by the EU and how it would ensure that this would be avoided in the future. Manservisi merely said this would be the subject of ongoing negotiations. "We have to find such rules," he said.

The Foreign Ministry said its point man on visa negotiations, Ambassador Anvar Azimov, would hold a press briefing on Tuesday.

Asked whether an agreement could be reached before a visit by EU Commission President Jose

Manuel Barroso to Moscow, scheduled for March 21, Manservisi merely said he hoped to achieve progress "as soon as possible."

However, he warned that EU negotiators might demand the inclusion of a separate dispute about airline passenger data. "This might slow down the process," he warned.

EU delegation spokesman Soren Liborius later explained that Manservisi referred to a federal bill that obliges airlines to submit passengers' personal data to law enforcement authorities even for flights that do not land in Russia but enter its airspace. He added that EU laws prohibit the sharing of such information, known as passenger name records, unless there is a data protection agreement with a given country.

It was not immediately clear when that bill would become law.

Apart from the visa-facilitation agreement, Moscow and Brussels are holding separate talks about abolishing visas altogether. However, negotiations about a visa waiver agreement can only begin after both sides have completed a list of requirements that ranges from border and passport security to refugee re-admission and human rights principles.

The EU on Monday for the first time [published](#) that list, also known as a common steps program.

Manservisi said that two of the program's four blocs had been completed and that work on the third, which includes legal issues, would begin in April. "Things are moving forward," he said, while he was adamant that there was no time frame for the process.

The EU visa talks are conducted on behalf of the Schengen group of states, which includes non-EU members like Switzerland and Norway, but excludes Britain, Ireland, Romania and Bulgaria.

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