

U.S. Embassy Slams Door on Student Workers

By [Jonathan Earle](#)

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The building of U.S. Embassy in Moscow

Without warning or explanation, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow has rejected an unprecedented percentage of Russian university students applying for visas to take part in the State Department's popular Summer Work and Travel program this year, dashing hopes and placing the program's future in doubt.

About 80-90 percent of the estimated 1,000 applicants who have applied for visas in Moscow since mid-March have received a green rejection slip, according to five Russian agencies that arrange the interviews. Last year, the number was 35-40 percent, they said, and more than 6,300 in all were approved.

The embassy refused to directly comment on the allegations, but agencies say the reasons sometimes provided by consular officers to individual students — that the applicant's employer is "unreliable," or that the applicant's English is not good enough — are bogus.

An unprecedented 80-90 percent of recent applicants to the work and travel program have been rejected, agencies say.

"We don't know what's going on. Maybe it's a result of the Magnitsky list, maybe it's a bad consular official. They're simply mocking Russian students. We don't know what to do," said Boris Samaryanov, general director of STAR Travel, one of 28 local agencies approved by the embassy.

Rejected applicants, who have spent months gathering documents and paying as much as \$2,500 on various fees, feel like a door has been slammed in their face. "My opinion about the United States has changed. I've had this negative feeling ever since I left the embassy," said Maria Silayeva, 20.

News of the refusals has also left sponsors that oversee the U.S. side of the program scratching their heads and waiting for an official explanation, according to a source close to the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly about it.

A Moscow Times reporter contacted the U.S. Embassy for comment regarding the allegations on March 28. An embassy representative initially said a meeting with consular officials could be set up for April 3 to discuss the Summer Work and Travel program, then later said that the meeting could not take place until April 9 and that consular officers would only be made available to provide information on the history of the program and its internal regulations.

After being told on Wednesday that the reporter's deadline was Thursday, the representative said consular officers would not be available to comment this week. Asked repeatedly for comment Thursday, the representative said: "The Embassy's priority is first and foremost the health, safety and welfare of our participants of the J-1 visa program," referring to the type of visa students on the program receive.

Russia has historically sent more students on the Summer Work and Travel program than any other country. But in recent years, the economic downturn and new regulations aimed at reducing fraud and abuse appear to have hit Russia particularly hard, outweighing official exhortations to boost exchanges.

At the program's peak in 2008, Russia sent a record 27,517 students to the United States, where they spend three or four months working low-skilled jobs at resorts and restaurants, as well as soaking up American culture.

Back then, officials at the U.S. Embassy talked about boosting the number to 40,000, agency

representatives said, and in a bilateral statement issued in April 2009, Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev expressed a shared desire to see "more students studying in each other's country, more cultural exchanges."

But the program has also been dogged by scandal. About 10 percent of Russian participants overstayed their visas, Samaryanov said, and media reports emerged of students, often Russian, enduring slave-like conditions.

In late 2011, New York prosecutors charged 20 in an alleged scheme organized by the Gambino and Bonnano crime families to bring Eastern European women to the United States on fraudulent work-and-travel visas to work as exotic dancers.

Program rules were tightened that year, particularly in Russia, Ukraine and other Eastern European countries that the State Department said had a "higher prevalence of problems," and the total number of students was capped at 109,000, down from the high of 153,000 participants in 2008.

"The embassy kept on repeating new requirements to us as if we were children: 'real student, real job, real English,'" said Valery Yesiyev, general director of Intex, another embassy-approved agency.

Last year, Russia sent 6,036 students, slipping to fourth place behind Ireland and fellow "problem" countries Bulgaria and Ukraine. Samaryanov said that if the embassy's refusal rate doesn't drop, the number could fall to about 500 this year, 2 percent of what it was five years prior.

"One more year of this behavior, and there will be no program. No employers are going to hire Russian students. Why would they waste the time? They'll go to Bulgaria and Kazakhstan instead," he said.

Agencies insist that they're not to blame for the jump in refusal rates this year, saying they've been blindsided by an apparent policy shift at the Moscow embassy that has curiously not extended to consulates in other Russian cities, they said.

Applicants' English skills are checked by employers, U.S. government-licensed sponsors and agencies, and the sponsors also vet their employers, which include big names like the Vail Ski Resort in Colorado and Busch Gardens in Virginia. Unlike in past years, when students could search for a job after arriving in America, applicants now must have a job contract before they can interview for a visa.

Consular officers typically do not explain their decision to applicants. Some students are summarily dismissed if they appear to struggle with English. But some are being told that their employers were shady. This has led a number of them to feel that the interview itself is a pointless formality.

Yekaterina Mitrofanova, 20, said her interviewer probed her interest in American history, but then rejected her on the grounds that her employer, Rachel's Waterside Grill in Freeport, New York, "couldn't be identified."

An Internet search revealed that the restaurant has been in operation for 16 years and was

recently voted best seafood joint on Long Island in an online poll conducted by a local newspaper.

Silayeva, a student at the Moscow State University of Psychology and Education, was told that her employer, the popular Tower of the Americas restaurant in San Antonio, Texas, was "unreliable."

"Your English is great, but we can't give you a visa,' the consul told me," she said. "It's impossible to describe the feeling of getting rejected. Your dreams collapse in a moment. You feel empty inside."

The difficulties brought back memories of 2003, when agencies complained about high refusal rates possibly linked to post-9/11 security measures. But even that year, more than half of the 10,550 applications were approved, the embassy told The Moscow Times then.

Agencies feel that the employment issue is a red herring; the refusals are deliberate, and students should have been warned. Indeed, sponsors, not the embassy, are charged with vetting job offers, according to program rules, and at a meeting in January, embassy officials told the agencies that they don't have the resources to vet employers.

"It looks like they're looking for any excuse to refuse a visa. It would be more honest if they just closed the program," said Irina Voronina, executive director of Prosto, one of the Russian agencies.

Yesiyev, a former program participant, said that for him the program opened a "giant window" onto the world. "I was born and grew up in a provincial city, and for me, Summer Work and Travel was my first trip abroad. It was a new world. I know how deeply the program changed my perspective."

Publicly available statistics suggest that while the window appears to be closing for work-and-study exchange students, it's rapidly opening for likely more affluent tourists and businesspeople, in part thanks to a new bilateral agreement that streamlines and simplifies the visa procedure.

The number of J-1 visas issued to work-and-study students, including participants in Summer Work and Travel and a handful of other programs, has fallen by 70 percent since its peak in 2008. At the same time, however, the issuance of B-1/B-2 visas, which combine business and pleasure, is up, and the total number of Russians receiving U.S. visas annually jumped 30 percent from 2008 to 2012.

A possible explanation is lingering concerns about mistreatment and human trafficking that have embarrassed the State Department in the past. Last month, a group of student workers made national headlines by protesting working conditions at a McDonald's in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, an incident that suggested that the government has not yet succeeded in stamping out program abuses.

Responding to the incident, Robin Lerner, deputy assistant secretary in charge of exchange programs, told NPR news that the instances of abuse were regrettable and rare.

"Most of the program is filled with wonderful placements," she said, "and the students say

what a wonderful time they had and the time they spent here in the United States will forever change their lives."

While that's still a tempting prospect for Maria Silayeva despite the frustration and the wasted time and money, she isn't sure if she'll re-apply next year. "I don't know if I can go through that again," she said.

Editor's note: This story has been updated from an earlier version to reflect the repeated attempts by The Moscow Times to obtain an explanation from the U.S. Embassy.

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