

Russian Startups Face Visa Hurdles to Compete in U.S. Business Contest

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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WASHINGTON — Russian technology startups that were selected as finalists in a prestigious U.S. business development competition might not be able to take part in the months-long contest because of visa problems, the head of an investment company that is co-sponsoring the event said Thursday.

Four teams of two Russians from startups developing apps to try on clothing virtually, a system to visually organize documents, web and mobile analytics, and a game to teach computer programming are supposed to arrive in Boston on Monday for the start of the MassChallenge Accelerator competition, said Axel Tillman, CEO of the RVC-USA investment firm, which has links to Russian venture capital funds and the Skolkovo Innovation Center.

But three of the four appear to have run into visa issues which might jeopardize their chances of vying for a share of the \$1 million in prizes up for grabs in the MassChallenge.

"The MassChallenge Accelerator requires about 4 1/2 months presence in the U.S., and a normal business visa doesn't cover that," Tillman said by phone from Boston, where the MassChallenge competition is held.

"The Russians would have to leave in the middle of the competition, so I asked for people applying for visas to take part in the MassChallenge to be granted a six-month visa, but I haven't heard back from Ambassador McFaul," Tillman said, referring to the U.S. ambassador to Moscow, Michael McFaul.

Tillman said the solution to the visa issue would be to include Russia in the U.S. visa waiver program, adding that the current situation "makes for a pretty lousy environment when you're trying to improve relations between the two countries."

The four Russian teams that were selected as finalists in this year's MassChallenge have a good chance of taking one of the 20 prizes of up to \$100,000 that will be awarded to the winning businesses in late October, Tillman said.

"All four Russian teams were in the top 10 to 20 percent of the finalists, whereas last year, the three Russian teams that made it into the accelerator phase of the competition were in the bottom 10 percent, out of 125 companies," Tillman said.

More than 1,200 startups from 39 countries applied to take part in this year's MassChallenge, with Russia fielding the second highest number of applicants after the United States. Fifty-four Russian startups applied to get into the competition, but only four made the grade.

They were Dressformer, a technology platform that allows users to virtually try on clothing and get feedback; Qbaka, which has developed a tool to track and analyze client-side web service problems at all stages; Zet Universe, developer of a platform that allows businesses to visually organize data; and SputnikBot, maker of a game that teaches children computer programming.

Russian entries for the MassChallenge were up by 50 percent compared to last year, highlighting "the growing traction of innovation in a country with a market economy just over 20 years old," RVC-USA said in a statement.

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