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Despite U.S.-Russia Tensions, Visa Deal Called a Success

By Natalya Krainova

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The U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

As U.S. and Russian officials enter the umpteenth month of wrangling over how to address the Syrian civil war, and politicians from the former Cold War foes maintain their hostile rhetoric, one of the countries' last bilateral agreements is turning one year old, and its success is showing that relations between the nations are not deteriorating in every sphere.

The U.S.-Russia visa deal that took effect in September 2012 seems to be delivering much of what it promised for the two countries and their citizens: more visitors going each way and easier procedures for visa applicants.

"Visa processing has become considerably easier and faster," said Yekaterina Kovganova, head of the Washington, D.C. office of Invisa Logistic Services USA, an official visa application center for the Russian Federation.

The agreement extended the validity period of visas for citizens of both countries to three years, up from the former average of one year, if the purpose of their visit is tourism, business, a homestay or humanitarian activities.

One year after a bilateral visa agreement came into effect, Americans and Russians are reaping its benefits.

In addition, it abolished the requirement for Americans traveling for business or on a homestay to obtain an invitation from a Russian entity that had to be approved at the Federal Migration Service, a process that took up to a month. Now, U.S. citizens coming to Russia for those purposes need only a notarized invitation that takes just a day to prepare. Moreover, Russian consulates no longer require the invitation to be sent by mail but accept a copy sent by e-mail or fax.

Inna, a 29-year-old instructor at City University of New York who travels to Russia about once a year as a tourist, received one of the new three-year visas after years of obtaining one-year visas and is pleased to be able to save money on the applications as a result.

A native of the Soviet Union who emigrated to the U.S. with her parents at the age of six and obtained U.S. citizenship in 1998, Inna said she traveled to her homeland to satisfy her love of Russian food and culture.

"I feel like I never got to learn enough about what it would have been like to grow up and live in Russia, so I am curious about it now," Inna said.

Despite the simplified visa rules for Americans, there has not been a dramatic rise in U.S. visitors to Russia since the deal took effect. The number of Russian visas issued to Americans between September 2012 and September 2013 increased by less than 3,000, or by about 2 percent, to nearly 146,000.

It also appears that a significant number of Americans coming to Russia are not taking advantage of the new three-year visas. Of the nearly 146,000 visas issued to Americans over the last year, just under 13,000, or 8.5 percent, were of the new type.

In the opposite direction, 20 percent more U.S. visas were issued in Russia in the first six months of 2013 compared to the same period last year, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow said. The total number of visas issued over that six-month period was more than 111,000.

For Russians, one of the main concerns when applying for a U.S. visa — the rejection rate — appears also to have been addressed in part by the bilateral deal.

Vladimir Atamansky, director of the Moscow-based Multiviza center, said that by his rough

count the number of U.S. visa denials for Russians applying through his company had decreased from about 10 percent to 1 percent in the past year.

Half a dozen Russians interviewed by The Moscow Times all said they were planning to take advantage of the new three-year term of visas.

"Of course we need it," said Vera Usoltseva, a 35-year-old advertising director, about the three-year term. Usoltseva and her husband and teenage daughter received their first-ever U.S. visas in February, allowing them to travel to the U.S. for the next three years.

"We enjoyed ourselves a lot in America and now it is our preferred destination, on a par with Europe," she said, adding that her family had figured out how to find cheap plane tickets to make the trips affordable.

But Usoltseva said she worried that rocky bilateral relations could create difficulties for ordinary citizens to get visas.

"Certainly I fear that politics will play a role," she said, noting that she expected visa hurdles for Russians not from the U.S. side but from Russian authorities.

"I have long been afraid that they will draw down the Iron Curtain again," Usoltseva said.

The U.S., for one, seems eager to attract more Russian visitors to its shores. Issuances of tourist and business visas to Russians have nearly doubled over the past three years, according to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, and the total number of Russian visitors to the U.S. has nearly quintupled in the past decade and continues to grow. By 2018, Russia is expected to rank among the top 20 countries in terms of number of inbound tourists to the U.S.

And while the terms of visas for both countries' citizens have gone up, the waiting times to receive them have gone down.

Inna, the instructor at City University of New York, said the three-year visa was "a little bit easier in terms of the waiting time" and took only nine days to get, while the one-year visas she formerly received took about three weeks.

There have been a few new bureaucratic hurdles put up by the visa deal. Inna said that filling out the application was "a little bit more involved" because she had to provide two copies of the application for a three-year visa, instead of just one, though she said this was "not a very big deal."

The other difference in terms of procedure was that for the three-year visa she had to go for an interview at the consulate.

"While it did not delay getting the visa, the interview was annoying, I was bombarded with very specific questions," Inna said, adding that she suspected it was because she spoke Russian.

"The person ahead of me who spoke only English was asked very easy questions and they were very polite to him," she said.

The old visa types also remain available, a boon for certain travelers. Bradley Gorski, 28, a third-year Ph.D. student in Russian literature at Columbia University in New York, had to apply for a visa at the last minute when his summer plans fell through, and while the three-year visa takes at least 10 business days to process, a one-year, single-entry visa can be expedited. His flight was five days later, so he went with the old type.

The officially set period for reviewing any of the previous types of applications for a Russian visa is from one to 20 working days, but in practice it takes seven to 10 working days on average, said Kovganova, of Invisa Logistic Services USA.

The three-year visa application must be fully processed within 15 calendar days, while in practice it takes 13 on average, she said.

"As a rule, there are no delays in the issuance of [any kind of] visas," Kovganova said, adding that visa denials were "isolated cases" and that her company had received no visa denials within the past year.

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