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Russians Keep Wary Eye on Looming U.S. Shutdown

By Andrew McChesney

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Russians would still get visas, but they couldn't visit the Statue of Liberty in New York, which would be closed in a government shutdown.

As Russians kept a wary eye on a looming U.S. shutdown, U.S. authorities offered assurances that a congressional standoff that could leave the federal government without money would not halt embassy support to U.S. citizens in Russia and the issuance of U.S. visas to Russians.

U.S. Congress, mired in a battle over government spending, must approve a spending bill for the new fiscal year by midnight Monday, or government agencies and programs that are seen as nonessential will start shutting down for the first time in 17 years.

The Republican-led House passed a bill on Saturday extending funding in exchange for stripping financing for President Barack Obama's signature healthcare reform. But the Democratic-led Senate has signaled that it would reject the bill Monday and return it to the

House, which would have until midnight to pass it and avoid a government shutdown.

The budgetary battle made headlines in Russian media on Monday. "The 'Elephants' Are Robbing the U.S. Government," read a headline in the government-run Rossiiskaya Gazeta, referring to the symbol for the Republican Party. The state television broadcaster Vesti cautioned, "The U.S. government may be left penniless on Tuesday."

The reports noted that a showdown might be a harbinger of worse things to come, with the U.S. Treasury facing a default on government debt in mid-October if both houses of Congress fail to strike an agreement to increase the debt ceiling. Economists have warned that such a default could send shockwaves through global markets, including Russia.

But any U.S. shutdown was not expected to affect U.S. expatriates or ordinary Russians — at least for now.

The U.S. Embassy in Moscow would continue processing Russian applications for visas, as well as U.S. applications for passports, because these services are financed by fees. The embassy also would continue to provide assistance through its American Citizen Services.

“The [State] Department and USAID receive funding in the annual State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act,” an embassy spokesperson explained by e-mail. “Under this law, appropriated money can remain available for expenditure for varying time periods, depending on the specific appropriation account. Some money is only available for one year, while other appropriations accounts are multi-year, fee-based, or available until expended.

“In addition, because FY 2013 appropriations were not received until late March, certain State Department and USAID accounts have residual funds that will be available after Sept. 30, 2013,” the spokesperson said.

Also, the U.S. space agency NASA would keep personnel at Mission Control in Houston and other places to support the International Space Station, where three Russians, two Americans and a European astronaut are deployed. Two of the Russians and an American arrived only late last week, returning the space station its full, six-member live-aboard crew.

But any Russians who reach the U.S. with new visas might find that popular tourist attractions like the Smithsonian museums in Washington, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island in New York, and Alcatraz Island near San Francisco are closed. All government-run museums and national parks would be closed under a shutdown, and visitors using overnight campgrounds would get 48 hours to leave, The Associated Press reported.

The last time the government shut down was on Dec. 16, 1995, amid a budgetary battle

between Democratic President Bill Clinton and Republicans led by then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich. The shutdown lasted three weeks.

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