

Medvedev's Tight Security Clouds Innovations Forum

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Medvedev, pictured inspecting a model plane at the forum Thursday, was blamed for causing security delays. **Mikhail Metzel**

A high-profile Open Innovations Forum running in Moscow through the weekend could have been renamed the Closed Innovations Forum because the doors were shut — quite literally — to some would-be attendees.

Even those lucky enough to clear the document checks and other authorization procedures found themselves waiting for the less fortunate — a throng mired in heavy security connected to the appearance of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev at the event.

As a result, the entire forum schedule had to be pushed back by about 90 minutes on the opening day of the four-day event Thursday.

The Open Innovations Forum, held for the second year, is an attempt by Russia to showcase

innovative policies like Skolkovo, the country's answer to California's Silicon Valley, while gathering together political and business leaders. Among the big names on opening day were the prime ministers of Finland and France, who joined the initiator of Russia's innovations drive, Medvedev. (Full disclosure: The Moscow Times is an information partner of the forum.)

People started lining up at 9 a.m. to get entry badges at the Crocus Expo exhibition center. But the worst came later.

To gain access, the several thousand attendees registered for the forum had to obtain a hologram-like sticker from federal agents assigned to protect Medvedev, who as Kremlin leader first embraced innovative policies as a way to wean Russia off its energy dependence.

Grim-looking men in suits peeled the shiny stickers off rolls, checking attendees' IDs against a database on two computers and a wad of printed-out lists.

People anxious to secure a sticker or at least check the database to see whether they might qualify for one formed new waiting lines.

The people important enough to have personal aides walk them through the entrance procedures rejoiced. The others waited. And waited.

"I was not given security clearance even though we submitted the paperwork in advance," said a representative of VTB, the state banking giant and one of the sponsors of the forum. He spoke on condition of anonymity, saying he feared his superiors would dismiss him because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

Many people complained directly to the security personnel. "I am a member of the French delegation!" a gentleman with a thick French accent told one officer.

"More important people have been shown the door here," the officer replied.

To be fair, clearing security is not an isolated problem at events attended by top government officials. Scores of delegates, including senior European politicians, were forced to wait for up to five hours after a security glitch rejected their entry badges to the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2012. A Moscow Times journalist saw his car towed, on orders of Medvedev's security, from the area near a Moscow hotel where Medvedev addressed a meeting of the World Economic Forum in October 2012.

Security clearance was not an issue Friday at the forum, where delegates were enthusiastically discussing how new technology could be used to develop Russia's health-care industry and ease Moscow's traffic jams. But the picture was not as pretty on Thursday morning.

One woman walked up to the security officers, waving a green diplomatic passport. "Diplomats go there — over to the stand by the entrance," an officer told her.

The woman may have been fortunate enough to get in. But then again, as one of the officers noted, more important people have been turned down. And that says nothing about members of the media. After waiting for an hour and a half, one Moscow Times journalist who had registered for the event was told to come back in the afternoon.

"Try again after Medvedev leaves," a security officer advised.

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