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Russia and North Korea Discuss Visa-Free Regime

By The Moscow Times

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Un smiling as he meets athletes who won gold medals at the 17th Asian Games.

Russia and North Korea have discussed establishing a bilateral visa-free regime, Far East Development Minister Alexander Galushka said, news agency Interfax reported on Tuesday.

The issue of "transitioning to a visa-free regime between Russia and North Korea" was discussed during a recent trip to North Korea, Galushka was quoted as saying.

Russia under President Vladimir Putin has sporadically courted North Korea, which was heavily backed by the Soviet Union. Russia hopes to gain direct access to South Korean markets via a railway and natural gas pipeline, while simultaneously ensuring Russia's diplomatic relevance in the region by positioning itself as a rational voice in Pyongyang's ear.

These efforts have been accelerated as Moscow's relations with the West crumble amid

the ongoing crisis in Ukraine and sanctions intended to punish Russia for its involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

The topic of easing visa restrictions for Russian businesspeople seeking to do business in North Korea was broached by Galushka and North Korean officials as part of a meeting of an intergovernmental commission in June in Vladivostok. The two countries hope to raise the level of interstate trade to $1 billion annually by 2020.

Galushka on Tuesday could not specify a timeframe for how long the decision on a visa-free regime might take, but warned that the abolishment of visa restrictions between Russia and North Korea "will not happen instantaneously," the Vedomosti newspaper reported.

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