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# Moscow Responds to U.S. Visa Freeze With Accusations of Political Meddling

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**Andrei Makhonin / TASS**

Russian officials on Monday took a swipe at their American counterparts following a U.S. visa freeze, accusing Washington of pushing for regime change in Moscow.

The U.S. Embassy in Russia on Monday announced it would temporarily suspend processing all non-immigrant visa applications for Russian citizens beginning Aug 23. Operations in Moscow would resume in September, but consular services for Russians in St. Petersburg, Vladivostok, and Yekaterinburg would "remain suspended indefinitely."

For Russians, the announcement spells long delays with visas taking months longer to review and all future applications going through Moscow.

Andrei Klimov, the head of the Federation Council's committee on state sovereignty, told the Interfax news agency on Monday that, "If there are going to be infringements on the rights of our citizens, it is crucial to take reciprocal measures against U.S. citizens."

But Klimov's appeared to be a lone voice, with most top Russian officials saying Moscow would show restraint.

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Russia would not "take out its anger on American citizens."

"So if someone hoped that this stupid example would be contagious, they miscalculated," he was cited as saying by the state-run RIA Novosti news agency.

"It's a familiar logic, the logic of those who organize color revolutions," he said, adding the move reflects the "momentum of the [Barack] Obama administration."

The embassy's announcement is just the latest episode in a diplomatic spat between the countries after the U.S. Congress passed fresh sanctions against Russia in late July, which President Donald Trump begrudgingly signed into law on Aug. 2.

Moscow has already responded by ousting hundreds of U.S. diplomats and barring access to embassy properties near Moscow. Russian officials previously said that further measures would be introduced if the U.S. Embassy in Russia allowed the cuts to disrupt consular work.

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On Monday Russian officials said that the decision was the result of political wrangling in Washington and presented Moscow as the defender of the rights of ordinary citizens.

"Russia is in conflict with forces who draw on sanctions, who want a confrontation with our country, but we don't have a conflict with American society," Alexei Pushkov, a Federation Council member and a frequent commentator on foreign affairs, was cited as saying by the Interfax news agency. "Those who want to visit Russia, should have the opportunity to do so."

"I don't see the benefit or the point of reacting to a decision, taken, in my opinion, by an offended superpower."

Speaking to Russia's state-funded Sputnik radio, the deputy head of the Federation Council's foreign affairs committee, Vladimir Dzhabarov, echoed Pushkov's point.

"The Americans are trying to turn Russian citizens against the Foreign Ministry leadership and Russian authorities, but [U.S.] steps have meant people can't calmly travel to America."

Non-immigrant visas are issued to travelers who want to visit the U.S. temporarily, as opposed to applying for permanent residency in the country. In Moscow, officials argued the visa freeze would affect relatively few Russian citizens.

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Business travellers would still be able to apply for a passport at the Moscow embassy, and tourists "can choose a different destination," Dzhabarov, the senator, said. "Trips to the United States don't affect millions of Russians," Klimov, another senator, added.

According to U.S. statistics, the Embassy in Moscow and Russian consulates last year issued more than 180,000 such visas.

A visa center in Yekaterinburg on Monday morning called for calm in a post on the social media website VK, which it later deleted. In written comments to the Moscow Times, the International Visa Center said the announcement meant the outcomes of 19 applications were now up in the air.

"The applicants feel uncomfortable, because they don't know what to do with tickets and hotels," the agency said. "This is a very sticky situation."

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