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Sanctions Spat Sends Russians Abroad for U.S. Visas

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Sergey Bobylev / TASS

Russian passport holders are flocking to neighboring countries for U.S. visas amid a diplomatic spat that has seen wait times for visas to America soar.

The United States stopped processing non-immigrant visas in August, after Moscow ordered its embassy and three consulates to cut hundreds of staff. The move was one of a series of tit-for-tat measures after former U.S. President Barack Obama expelled dozens of Russian diplomats over claims of election interference in late 2016.

The result was a dramatic drop U.S. visa applications in Russia, the Meduza news site reported this week.

Some 60 percent fewer visas were granted at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow between September and August, the report states, while in St. Petersburg, the U.S. consulate issued approximately a quarter of the visas.

The consulate in Vladivostok issued 55 percent fewer visas over the two-month period, while the consulate in Yekaterinburg saw an 84 percent drop, Meduza reported.

State Department data cited by Meduza estimates that the number of U.S. visas granted to Russian citizens worldwide dropped by more than half in September.

According to U.S. travel data, Russian tourist visits dropped by over a quarter so far this year.

The Baltic States and Georgia, which share borders with Russia, saw major spikes in the number of U.S. tourist visas that were issued in recent months.

The number of U.S. visas granted in August and September rose by 28 percent in Lithuania, 55 percent in Latvia and 77 percent in Estonia. Georgia posted a 166-percent month-to-month increase in the number of U.S. visas issued.

U.S. diplomatic missions in Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius declined to comment on whether the increases are related to the suspension of visa services in Russia. Each noted, however, that the number of applications from foreigners "significantly increased" in the second half of the year.

Consulates in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok restarted visa processing on Friday for some Russian passport holders who had previously received a U.S. visa

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