

The election will test the mood of a nation mired in economic crisis and warring in the North Caucasus.

The election commission has been tough this year in seeking to ensure that only law-abiding, tax-paying citizens enter the race, which has led to awkward questions even for such venerable figures as former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov.

The rigorous checks involved demanding explanations for any undeclared income, with the commission using its discretion on whether or not it was serious enough to bar the offender.

They also drew upon traffic police records of vehicle registration, which led to questions about an old Lada which Primakov once owned but no longer does.

#4

Date: Sun, 24 Oct 1999

From: Ronald Pope <73123.3543@compuserve.com>

Subject: Visa Embarrassment

The excellent NY Times article by Michael Gordon (JRL #3582) left out one very important negative aspect of the visa problem. Even when visas are granted, the Russian applicants are frequently treated extremely rudely. When I brought this to the attention of then Ambassador Thomas Pickering, he acknowledged that rudeness was never appropriate. One former State Department employee who had worked in the Consular Section said that she was often embarrassed by the behavior of her colleagues. Unfortunately, this problem hasn't been corrected. As Ambassador Pickering acknowledged, there is NO excuse for rudeness, even when a visa is denied.

In addition to this point, as the Times article indicates, the Consular Service is doing the U.S. a tremendous disservice when it denies visas to eligible students, scholars, and others. Even if many of them do find ways to stay on in the U.S.--legally or otherwise--America benefits more times than not. These are very bright, hard working people who are making a substantial contribution to our current prosperity. (Please note all the recent American Nobel Prize winners who speak English with a clear accent!)

Of course it is best when students and others return to Russia immediately to help with the desperately needed restructuring--and every effort should be made to encourage them to do so. However, arbitrarily denying visas is NOT the appropriate policy.

Many of those who don't go back when they have completed their education or teaching assignment may very well return at a later date. In addition, those who stay provide a trusted source of information on the "real America" that often effectively counters Russian myth and propaganda. For example, an emigre friend wrote that during a recent phone conversation his relatives in Russia asked him about alleged "hysterical anti-Russian sentiment" in America. His surprised gasp and silence was all the answer they needed in order to conclude that they weren't being told the truth.

The young men and women serving in the Consular Service in Moscow--and in all U.S. Embassies around the world--need to receive very clear instructions from their supervisors concerning acceptable behavior during interviews. Most important, the current trend toward increased denials of academic visas needs to be reviewed. Congress has to take ultimate responsibility. If a part of the U.S. government is clearly acting against U.S. interests, maybe some personnel changes need to be made.

Ronald Pope, President
Serendipity: Russian Consulting & Development, Ltd.
www.serendipity-russia.com
Associate Professor of Russian Politics
Illinois State University