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Defending the U.S. Visa Regime

By James D. Pettit

Two pieces critical of U.S. visa practices and their impact on Russian applicants appeared in The Moscow Times recently: "U.S. Visa Mess Dashes Summer Dreams," a staff news article, and "Visa Barriers Keep Us Apart," an op-ed by Russian Ambassador to the United States Yuri Ushakov reprinted from The Washington Post. As the newly arrived U.S. consul general in Moscow, I would like to respond with the hope of clarifying certain inaccuracies and misperceptions.

First, let me emphasize that the United States remains deeply committed to supporting contacts between ordinary Russians and Americans. Our government spends tens of millions of dollars every year to encourage U.S.-Russian exchanges. In fact, it is the largest bilateral exchange program we have anywhere in the world. The administration and the U.S. Congress have supported these programs because we believe that people-to-people contacts are the cornerstone of the fundamentally new relationship that our two countries have established over the past decade.

It is obvious, therefore, that the U.S. Embassy wants Russians to visit the United States and that we are committed to making it as easy and convenient as possible for them to do so -- consistent with the requirements of U.S. law. We sincerely regret that a number of students and visitors had difficulties with the visa process and that some were even prevented from traveling at all. This is all the more regrettable because it could have been avoided. Yes, it is true that the U.S. government has instituted new visa procedures over the past year in response to post-Sept. 11 concerns over terrorism. However, this embassy also made a concerted effort to inform exchange organizations about the new procedures and what the requirements were.

Unfortunately, some organizations, such as the one noted in the article, for whatever reason, failed to submit applications in a timely fashion and to instruct applicants properly on procedures. It was primarily these problems that created the delays in visa processing this summer. Our goal is to provide all applicants with rapid and efficient service, but given the high volume of applications, our office simply cannot process large numbers that do not meet the basic application requirements.

Despite the fact that we have tightened our visa processing procedures around the world since Sept. 11, 2001, there has been no significant change in our policy toward Russian visa applicants. Refusal rates for Russian visa applicants have not increased and continue at levels close to the global average. The number of Russian travelers to the United States continues to grow. Our current system of accepting visa applications by appointment through a private courier service has greatly enhanced the convenience of the process for the average applicant. When I last served in Moscow, there was no appointment system for visa interviews and most visa applicants were required to stand outside in long queues, regardless of the weather. At the time of writing, the average wait for a visitor visa is less than two weeks, and we hope to reduce it even further. The vast majority of applicants for visitor visas receive their visas. In contrast to requirements imposed by the Russian authorities, visitors to the United States do not need to have a U.S. "sponsor" in order to obtain a visa, nor do they need to purchase a package tour in advance.

Moreover, it has long been U.S. policy to encourage, on a reciprocal basis, the issuance of visas valid for multiple entries and lengthy validity periods. For example, we extend 10-year multiple-entry visas to citizens of dozens of countries and do not charge separate issuance fees (although the standard \$100 application fee applies to citizens of all countries). To date, Russian authorities have not been willing to provide such visas to U.S. visitors and business travelers and continue to charge hundreds of dollars for multiple-entry visas. Many American businessmen can attest to the difficulties of dealing with the Russian visa regime, which necessitates repeated applications for visas abroad and onerous registration requirements within Russia.

Finally, however, I must note that, much as we want to help Russians visit the United States, consular officers are also responsible for preventing illegal use of tourist and non-immigrant visas. By law, all visa applicants have to convince U.S. Embassy consular officers that they are not intending to immigrate to the United States.

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The plain fact is, some "tourist" visa applicants are intending to do just that, and history shows that over the years many visitors to the United States have overstayed their visas or have found a way to work there illegally.

I fully support Ambassador Ushakov's desire to improve and foster contacts between our two nations. I myself first came to Russia on a student exchange program, and I believe the summer work program described in the earlier article is an excellent example of the kind of opportunities the United States has made available to tens of thousands of young people from Russia and other states of the former Soviet Union. It is my hope and expectation that such programs and opportunities will continue to flourish between our countries, and as consul general I can assure you we will do everything we can to support them. It is especially important at this time in history that, even as we work to overcome the inconveniences inherent in any immigration system, we protect the close and friendly relationship we wish to maintain with Russia and the Russian people.

James D. Pettit, consul general at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, contributed this comment to The Moscow Times.