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## Do you need to know what the Russian media are writing about?

Friday, Aug. 29, 2003. Page 9

### Visa Handling Shows Cold War Era Not Dead

Letters

*In response to "Defending the U.S. Visa Regime," a comment by James D. Pettit, on Aug. 26, "Visa Barriers Keep Us Apart," a comment by Yuri Ushakov on Aug. 19, and "U.S. Visa Mess Dashes Summer Dreams," an article by Robin Munro on Aug. 15.*

Editor,

It has been nine years since Izvestia published an open letter to then-U.S. Ambassador Pickering regarding the humiliating treatment of Russian visa applicants by consular officers at the U.S. Embassy. Since that time, the outcry of the Russian public regarding the visa practices of the embassy has continued unabated, and dozens of critical articles in the Russian and Western press have been published. One would think that the embassy would take the steps necessary to implement cardinal changes in its Cold War-era handling of visa applications. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. As a U.S. immigration law practitioner with ten years of experience working in Moscow, I have come to the conclusion that two primary issues must be focused upon:

First, the U.S. Embassy's visa refusal rate must be dramatically reduced. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow refuses 25 percent of all visitor visa applicants. In contrast, Western embassies in Russia such as Britain and Finland deny fewer than five percent of all applicants.

In response to the inordinate number of complaints that our office received during the summer regarding visa denials at the embassy, I personally conducted a brief, informal survey outside the embassy three weeks ago. I found that 19 out of 30 visitor visa applicants leaving the embassy during a 45-minute period had been denied visas.

It must also be noted that, according to its own numbers, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow denied 30,000 nonimmigrant visa applications in the most recent fiscal year. By charging a \$100 nonrefundable visa application fee, the embassy received \$3 million from applicants who did not receive visas.

My second point is that visa applications must be handled objectively and transparently. Despite State Department rules that require consular officers to disclose the factual reason for a visa denial and advise the applicant of information that can be submitted to overcome a visa denial, applicants are handed form rejection letters and quickly dismissed. Routine requests to consular officials to discern information regarding visa applications are ignored.

Another example of this policy of nondisclosure relates to the Green Card Lottery. The embassy is not advising Green Card Lottery visa applicants in advance of the possibility that, due to newly implemented security checks, processing of their applications may not be completed by the Sept. 30 deadline for issuance of these visas. The result: A typical family of four that lives outside Moscow will incur more than \$1,500 in nonrefundable visa fees, as well as more than \$1,000 in additional

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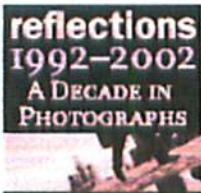
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expenses for travel, lodging and medical exam expenses, and may in the end, not receive their visas due to circumstances beyond their control, without being forewarned.

The high refusal rate and the absence of transparency are not merely "inconveniences inherent in any immigration system," as the new Consul General, James Pettit, has characterized the present plague of visa-related problems. These are conscious decisions made by policymakers. Sadly, judging by Pettit's comment, it appears that the current U.S. visa regime will continue unchanged for years to come.

*Kenneth White  
Managing Partner  
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Moscow*

*Editor,*

Pettit asks to have it both ways when he writes that rejection rates in Russia for U.S. visas are roughly the same as around the world but also claims that the United States has the largest exchange program with Russia. This is a comparison of percentage statistics with absolute numerical statistics. The awkward result: we turn down applications at the same rate, but there are so many applications that we can still boast of having the numerically largest quantity of exchange.

Secondly, the fee for U.S. visa applications is noticeably less than the Russian equivalent. But it is absurd for this fee to be the same all over the world, across vastly differing levels of relative income. One hundred dollars is nearly a third of the monthly income of many Muscovites -- I wonder what the figure is for Berlin?

A Russian friend of mine was recently denied a visa for a Ph.D. program in the natural sciences at a well-known U.S. university. He paid \$100 for a two-minute interview that took place in English, during which the consular officer never once looked at any of the documentation my friend produced to show he was not an immigration risk.

Afterwards, my friend was given a piece of paper informing him that he could check on the status of his application by calling a phone number that costs \$1.60 per minute.

*Tom Hurt  
Moscow*

*Editor,*

As an expat in Moscow I am always overjoyed to have friends make the effort to come out and visit. Many back home in Britain talk of coming, find the whole notion of my living in Moscow fascinating, but most get deterred by the visa process before booking flights, and opt for Italy instead.

However, one or two brave ones do make it and are pretty much unanimous in their surprise at what Moscow has to offer. These people should be held up high as tourist pioneers and treated by Russian authorities as such, not ripped off as were my visitors last weekend when we visited the Kremlin.

Most cities have worked out that if you treat tourists well, more will follow. I can appreciate that in these terrorist-troubled times it may make sense to have a guide attached to every visitor to the Kremlin but the exorbitant fees charged to tourists wanting to get in simply reinforces negative opinions about Russia being a place you go if you do not mind losing your shirt in the process. On the basis of what I saw last weekend, there are around 400 people now safely back in their respective home countries telling all their friends just that.

*Chris Allen  
Moscow*