

Coming to America

In response to "Hard to Give Away the Bride Without a Visa," an essay by Paul Keegan on May 31.

Editor,

I have just finished reading Paul Keegan's essay. First of all, my heartfelt congratulations to Mr. Keegan and his fiance, Tatyana, on their upcoming wedding! As much as it sounds like a cliché, I do wish them all the happiness in the world in their married life.

As for their hopes to hear anything intelligent, let alone positive, from a U.S. consulate anywhere in the world, they shouldn't hold their breath! Intelligence or compassion and America are contradictions in terms. None of the consuls, vice-consuls or any of the clowns working in the U.S. visa departments around the world could or do give a damn about any logical explanations, elaborations or -- God forbid -- the actual truth. They are so convinced that America is such a wonderful place that everybody must want to live there, but since they are not allowed, they can't be given visas. Do I exaggerate?

Allow me to share my experience. I was lined up for a notary service in one of the consulates behind a man whose 80-year-old mother was living in St. Petersburg and whose dying wish was to see her grandchildren, who live in the United States. Like Mr. Keegan's future in-laws, she speaks no English, she has a pension of about 800 rubles (\$30) per month (try living on that in the United States!) and her son had returned to Russia to help her get a visa. Simple economics would suggest that it takes less money for a man who is not rich to get his 80-year old mother to New York than it takes to get four people (himself, his wife and their two children) to St. Petersburg. He even quoted the immigration law to the consul herself -- in fluent English and with a copy of the federal statutes in his hands. Not a chance.

I could tell by the look on the consul's face that she had switched off a long time ago and was merely humoring this rather desperate man. She kept repeating like a parrot: "Your mother has no economic ties here, her family is in America and she could just stay there." At first I was annoyed because I had to wait, but then I started to listen to what was actually being said, and I became enraged. The arrogant, condescending tone and smirk from the consul was scandalous and made me ashamed to be an American.

Of course, Russia is not a peculiarity. Flashback to 1982 in the U.S. Consulate in Sydney, Australia. An Australian man applied for a visa for himself and his young son. Again, I was lined up directly behind the applicant. Again the vice consul was explaining that he could have a visa, but -- and I quote -- "we'll keep your son here as a hostage to make sure you come back." Doesn't that make you proud to come from the land of the free?

I had contemplated bringing my fiance to America for a visit. But I didn't want her to go through the embarrassing process of having to be interviewed for a visa. She does not deserve to be treated like a hostile enemy, a prostitute, a gold-digger or anything else. Seeing California just isn't worth it. She has received numerous European visas without any problems and has never overstayed any of them. When people smarten up and stop going to America and simply enjoy the rest of the world without bothering with the United States, when America's tourism industry is in the dumpster, then -- maybe -- there will be enough pressure on Congress to stop this madness and arrogance.

But I doubt that this will happen anytime soon.

*Peter Beck
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Editor,

We got some great news Tuesday morning -- Tatyana's parents had their visas approved and they flew to New York on Wednesday morning. I'm not sure we could have done that without getting my piece published in The Moscow Times.

so thank you so much for working so hard to get it into the newspaper before it was too late. You've helped make two families and about 170 people who will be showing up for the wedding very happy.

We know, of course, that we were very lucky and lots of other Russians don't have the advantages we had, so I'm going to continue writing about this, and I hope The Moscow Times does as well. The system as it now operates is an utter abomination.

Thanks again!