

Pros, Cons of the U.S. Visa Application Process

In response to letters published in the last two Saturday letters sections regarding the Consular Section of the U.S. Embassy.

Editor,

I am responding to the letters you have published in your last two Saturday editions regarding the Consular Section of the U.S. Embassy. Two issues arise: the question of the visa process for tourist, student and business visas, and access to the Consular Section.

The U.S. visa process is actually quite straightforward. Because business travel and tourism are good for the United States, we *want* people to be successful when they apply. In fact, we issue three fourths of the visas requested, and well over half of them are issued without an interview.

To be successful, the applicant must know what we expect to accomplish at the interview. When the U.S. Congress wrote the Immigration and Nationality Act, it said that anyone applying for a visa must be presumed to be an intending immigrant. The applicant's goal at the interview should be to demonstrate that the assumption of intending immigration is false. The vice consul's main goal is to determine whether or not the applicant is likely to return to Russia and not stay longer than authorized. The vice consul also must determine if the applicant is likely to engage in any illegal activity, or unauthorized employment, during his or her time in the U.S. Since the United States has no internal travel controls, the government depends on us to screen out these applicants. Consequently, when we interview applicants, we ask about the reasons they have for returning to Russia (employment, studies, property, or companies they may run). We also ask about the purpose of the visit to the United States. The same standards apply to visa applicants at every U.S. embassy worldwide.

Maintaining order outside any embassy is the responsibility of the host government, and the Russian govern-

ment is responsible for the street to a large waiting room with adequate seating and toilet facilities. At that point, people will not have to exit and re-enter the building as they do now to pay fees and pick up visas. In the meantime, we have made arrangements with FedEx to return passports to visa applicants for a modest fee. This eliminates the need to return to the embassy to pick up the issued visa.

We are also acutely aware of the

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difficulty of contacting the embassy over our current telephone system. Last summer, we contracted for a survey of our phone service and learned that we actually receive only about a third of the calls people place to us. We expect this to be ameliorated by the new phone system, which will go on line next week.

We urge people to contact us at our

her visa in Kiev, the lines weren't too long, and the embassy staff were professional and courteous. As mentioned in your article, it was clear that a number of people were having a hard time filling out the application due to both language issues and an inability to comprehend the nature of the questions being asked on the form.

Our attempts to apply for a U.S. immigrant visa at the end of 1999 were another matter entirely. We applied for my wife's U.S. immigrant visa in Moscow because I lived in Moscow at the time, and the U.S. embassy in Ukraine does not process immigrant visa applications. If it's any consolation, Russians might take solace in the treatment afforded to U.S. citizens at the U.S. embassy in Moscow:

• We stopped by the embassy to pick up an application form and received a list of around a dozen documents which my wife would be required to produce to obtain an immigrant visa. All documents were to be originals or certified copies and needed to be translated into English. On studying the documents required, it was clear that two thirds of the documents were not necessary based on my wife's immigration status. The INS apparently requests the same

be mailed to the address in Ukraine where my wife had told them she should be staying for the next few weeks.

So I started calling the Moscow embassy from the United States, where I had started a new job. I must have called 20 times, if not more. I would call the INS number, the phones would ring and ring and ring, and I would then be transferred to the receptionist. The receptionist would then give me the choice of either being transferred to back to INS or leaving a message. My messages were not answered, and my transferred calls would usually ring until I was transferred back to the receptionist. Occasionally, the phone was transferred to a Russian employee of the embassy who would helpfully transfer me to a phone that wasn't answered. Eventually I learned the name of a supervisor in the INS section of the Moscow embassy and asked the receptionist to transfer me to him, which generally resulted in more of the same: unanswered calls and messages which weren't returned. On two occasions, I was actually able to reach the supervisor of the INS section: He hung up on me once and transferred me to a phone that didn't answer the second time. All of this just to find out the

the Russian issuing her visa explained to her, "In Russia, you are Svetlana." So now half of my wife's official documents refer to her as "Svetlana" and the other half as "Svitlana."

I readily acknowledge that I had resources available to me that most Russians don't, namely the right as a U.S. citizen to involve the office of a U.S. congressman. While the Russians around me were treated worse than I was, I would not characterize the treatment I received as acceptable. My experience with the U.S. embassy in Moscow was the worst I've ever experienced at the hands of any embassy in terms of working hours, lines, lack of courteousness, and failings to answer the phone or respond to faxes. The only explanation that I can offer for the failure of the Moscow embassy to behave with impunity is that none of their customers are U.S. citizens and that the Russian staff of the INS seemed to regard Russians who would wish to leave Russia with disapproval if not outright hostility.

Someday the Russians who receive immigrant visas will be U.S. citizens. I hope when that someday comes, they'll work together to improve matters. Then again, maybe this is wishful thinking: As U.S. citizens, maybe they won't feel a need to change the INS.

Aaron Leatherwood
United States

What Price Progress?

In response to "Kill the Yankees' a Mantra of Counterculture," April 26.

Editor,

That the violent lyrics of the Russian underground music scene apparently are becoming all the rage in the provinces is more understandable if one considers the sacrifices this country has made of late. It has been estimated that the transition from communism to capitalism has silently cost Russia some 6 million men in the last decade. These fatalities underscore the pain and suffering that necessarily accompany any



DEAR READERS:

Something on your mind? Write The Moscow Times a letter.

We welcome letters to the editor and we will be publishing them prominently in this space. You can send your letter to Opinion Page Editor Suzanne Thompson by e-mail to thompson@imedia.ru; by fax to (7095) 937-3393 or 937-3394; or by post to The Moscow Times, Ulitsa Pravdy, Dom 24, 125124 Moscow, Russia. (If you are writing from abroad, send it to The Moscow Times, c/o IPS, 666 5th Avenue, Suite 572, New York NY, 10103).

Write in English or Russian. Praise the government or slam the media. Write a lot or write just a little. All we ask is that you sign the letter, and tell us how we can get in touch with you to check that it's really you.

We do edit letters, mostly for spelling and grammar, to bring transliterations in line and for other nitpicky moments. In some cases we also are forced to cut letters to make them fit a space — though we try to take care not to distort or water down the writer's point.

We look forward to hearing from you!

worldwide.

Maintaining order outside any embassy is the responsibility of the host government, and the Russian government has assigned this task to the Interior Ministry. The Interior Ministry has set up guard posts at all of the entrances to the embassy compound; those guards can and do control access to the area in front of our Consular Section.

Generally speaking, anyone who identifies himself as an American citizen with a valid U.S. passport is allowed by the militia to come directly into the American Citizen Services Unit. Families adopting small children, likewise usually go to the front of the line for the Immigrant Visa Unit and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. People experiencing difficulties, such as Americans who have lost their passports, should request assistance of the U.S. Embassy guards, who frequently can also be found outside near the entrance and can be identified by their U.S. flag arm patches and gray U.S. Embassy caps.

It is not necessary to wait hours in line for visas. The side entrance to the covered area where we take nonimmigrant visa applications is open from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Usually by 11 a.m. there is no line to go into that facility. When applicants require interviews, they receive a sheet that gives them information about the interview and what the vice consuls will want to see. This sheet specifically advises applicants to come for their interview no earlier than 15 minutes before their appointment, because we will not admit them earlier due to the lack of waiting room space to accommodate them.

This is going to change. We have architectural plans to begin remodeling the waiting areas of the Consular Section at the end of this summer. The plan is to bring everyone in from the

e-mail address: consulmo@state.gov. Most simple questions, such as our hours of operation, the requirements for immigrant and nonimmigrant visas, absentee voting, IRS and our advice about declaring what currency you bring into the United States can be found on our website: www.usembassy.state.gov/moscow/. American Citizen Services has a direct number for emergencies during the workday, which currently is 956-4295. The after-hours emergency number is 956-4422. The new phone numbers will be 728-5577 during the day and 728-5109 for after-hours emergencies.

In closing, your readers are our visa clients. A lack of reliable information about the visa process has helped precipitate the recent spate of letters. Since the media serves as gatekeeper of conventional wisdom, I invite you to make arrangements for one of your journalists to spend a day on our side of the glass.

Laura A. Clerici
Consul General and Minister
Counselor for Consular Affairs
Moscow

Excruciating Procedure

Editor,

I read with interest your recent article concerning the problems that Russians have in obtaining visas to travel abroad.

My wife is a citizen of Ukraine and was able to obtain a visa to visit the United Kingdom with little difficulty. The procedure was reasonably straightforward and consisted of filling out a form (about 20 minutes), waiting in line, and returning to pick up a visa later in the afternoon. We applied for

documentation from all immigrant visa applicants, despite the fact that documentation requirements vary greatly by the type of immigrant visa. A number of Russians had made multiple trips to Moscow try to get their applications and documentation in order, a problem which could have been resolved the first time if the application instructions were made clear. Is it a coincidence that so many businesses in Moscow specialize in providing U.S. immigration assistance?

•We returned to the embassy to request clarification and were rudely told that we needed to provide all of the documentation on the list by one of the Russian employees of the embassy. We then waited until one of the U.S. employees of the embassy was available, and he explained to us which documentation was required. Fortunately, the documentation needed by the Moscow embassy was consistent with the documentation we had been told to assemble in the informational handouts, so helpfully provided by the U.S. embassy in Ukraine.

•We submitted the required application forms, and the embassy promised to mail us an interview date for which my wife was to come to the embassy. I then traveled back to the United States in advance of my wife, expecting that she would follow in a few weeks.

•After a couple weeks in the United States, it occurred to me that I didn't know the address to which my wife's interview invitation would be mailed. Would her interview date be mailed to my Moscow apartment? Or would it instead be mailed to my wife's address in Ukraine, where she maintains her propiska? Or maybe it would

date of my wife's visa interview.

•I then decided that phoning the INS wasn't going to work, and that I should try sending a fax. I sent a politely worded fax to the supervisor in the INS section whom I had attempted to call earlier, as his name was the only name I had. My fax went unanswered, despite my requests for urgent assistance as my wife was pregnant.

•After waiting a week for an answer to my fax, I called my congressman's office in desperation, and one of my congressman's assistants started working on the matter. Amazingly, he

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said that his calls were also not returned, but apparently his written correspondence was answered and we received an interview date. As I explained to my congressman's assistant, I wasn't trying to cause trouble, but my wife was seven months pregnant and we wanted to bring her back to the United States to give birth as she had experienced delivery complications with her first child.

•Everything went well at my wife's immigrant visa interview, after which they granted her an immigrant visa under the name "Svetlana." Mind you, her Ukrainian name is "Svitlana," all of her application forms listed her as "Svitlana," and her Ukrainian foreign passport also says "Svitlana," but as

tort or water down the writer's point.
We look forward to hearing from you!

million men in the last decade. These fatalities underscore the pain and suffering that necessarily accompany any social and cultural upheaval. And unfortunately, the "trickle-down theory" of economic recovery will probably require a long time before it begins to fill the empty buckets waiting beyond the gates of Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

However, the problem remains that many Russians do not want their buckets filled if it means being inundated with Western products and culture. This is not really a new experiment for Russia. Peter the Great caused a similar stir amongst his contemporaries; the famous scholar Nicholas V. Riazanovsky documented in "A History of Russia" that "Peter the Great hit Muscovy with a tremendous impact. ... Rumor spread and legends grew that the reformer was not a son of Tsar Alexis, but a foreigner who substituted himself for the true tsar during the latter's journey abroad, that he was an impostor, a usurper, indeed the Antichrist."

Russians are not the only ones who are a bit cynical about the "progress" that has taken the country by storm. Most first-time visitors to Moscow are genuinely confounded by what they find here: a beautiful and interesting city unlike any other place; a history filled with amazing stories and almost mythical achievements; intelligent, beautiful people who are quite confident about themselves and their future despite the alleged economic crisis.

Yet an uncomfortable feeling persists. Will Russians simply assimilate the vast reform programs, products and advice of the West? Or is there a limit to how many fast-food restaurants, foreign music, foreign films, foreign advertisements, and foreign products it will take to crush the intriguing riddle that is Russia? What price the Russian soul?

Robert Bridge
Moscow

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Отпечатано в типографии ПО "Пресса-1", Москва, ул. Правды, 24. Тип. № 12682.

Тираж 35000. Цена свободная