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## The Russians Aren't Coming

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The Russian-American relationship has a serious problem. No, it's not Iraq, Iran or North Korea, each of which is the subject of complex but productive dialogue. The problem is more mundane but still potentially disruptive. It is the problem of American visas.

It's encouraging that Russia and the United States work well together to try to overcome repercussions of the Iraq war and to continue their cooperation on a wide range of issues. The special trust between Presidents Putin and Bush -- and good working relationships among many senior officials -- complement our important common interests and values.

But sustainable strategic partnership between Russia and the United States will not be possible without considerable improvement in contacts between our societies. Broader public dialogue and exchanges are essential to building a solid foundation for bilateral relations in our democratic political systems.

Regrettably, the public dialogue between Russia and the United States is suffering real damage from American visa policies, which sharply and unduly restrict business trips, academic exchanges, tourism and other travel by Russian citizens to the United States. Even official delegations have experienced unnecessary denials and delays. As a result, the visa problem has become one of the thorniest issues on our bilateral agenda. It is also an emotional issue among the Russian people and in the State Duma, where anxiety over this problem could have unpredictable consequences.

Everyone in Russia understands why America must be careful after Sept. 11. Many Russian citizens have died in terrorist attacks in recent years. What Russians cannot understand is why, for example, Russian high school students should be considered a threat to American security. This summer a group of bright teenagers from across Russia -- invited by a member of Congress -- were told the night before their scheduled departure that they would not receive visas. This particular trip was saved through political intervention, but the vast majority of Russians seeking to travel to the United States do not have political patrons. Hundreds of student applicants for the summer work and travel program are still waiting for visas, with very little summer left. One in every three Russian college students who requests a visa is turned down.

Russian officials were not able to attend the recent Earth Observation Summit in Washington because they were refused visas. There have been similar incidents involving members of the Russian Academy of Sciences and other officials and experts invited to participate in different events.

Even more disturbing are instances of visa denials in the so-called humanitarian cases when people are not able to join other members of their families already in the United States or visit ailing relatives or deal with other emergency situations.

For many Russians, applying for a visa is their first direct experience with America; sadly, it is only rarely a pleasant one. And even if visas are granted, they are routinely issued at the last minute, adding unnecessary stress. New procedures effective Aug. 1 require mandatory personal interviews for most applicants and are likely to make a bad situation even worse.

Consider the realities of life in Russia. It spans 11 time zones, and yet it hosts four American consular posts. A resident of Sochi on the Black Sea coast would have to make a 2,000-mile round trip to Moscow, spend the night there and pay a \$100 fee (itself nearly a full month's average wage) simply to be interviewed -- and then might have to wait weeks or months to learn whether a visa would be granted.

It was not so long ago that the United States was actively promoting the idea of people-to-people contacts, while the Soviet Union resisted. Now it is the other way around.

Mandatory interviews would be understandable if they were an effective barrier against terrorism, but most interviews involve less than three minutes of conversation with an overloaded consular officer. In-depth personal interviews are surely essential in some cases, but wholesale pro forma interviews create hardship and ill will while providing little or no security benefit. Everything that has been done recently by U.S. authorities to complicate visa procedures is, unfortunately, an invitation for reciprocal measures. I hope that we will not be forced to take such measures.

There is a better way. Russia's and America's intelligence and law enforcement agencies are working together ever more effectively, as demonstrated by their recent collaboration to foil a plot to smuggle Russian-made surface-to-air missiles into the United States. Russian agencies can readily provide much more information on suspicious visa applicants than can be gleaned from a brief interview.

Exchange of intelligence on terrorist organizations and organized crime between our security services, creation of common databases on illegal immigrants and on criminal activities and closer cooperation between our law enforcers of the type described above will surely be a much more reliable deterrent against potential terrorists than indiscriminate interviews of law-abiding citizens.

This kind of cooperation would be a major step forward in broadening the practical joint efforts of our two governments. Finding a solution to the visa problem will strengthen the U.S.-Russian partnership.

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