

The Visa Conundrum

Deborah Anne Palmieri

The problem of getting visas for Russians traveling to the U.S. from Russia just seems to be getting worse. Certainly mounting cases, experienced by our membership, of delays and denials coming across my desk supports that contention.

Russian Ambassador to the U.S. Yuri Ushakov accented the depth of diplomatic concerns about the restrictions in his August 17 editorial to *The Washington Post*, "The Russians Aren't Coming." *The Moscow Times* is raising public awareness through timely coverage of the problem. First came the August 15 article "U.S. Visa Mess Dashes Summer Dreams," about thousands of students who missed sought after positions as summer camp counselors due to processing snags and bureaucracy. An August 26 editorial by the new consul general at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, James D. Petit, "Defending the U.S. Visa Regime" speaks to efforts by Embassy personnel to keep the processing system humming along and the constraints and necessities they face to meet national security concerns.

The conundrum in this context refers to the difficult problem posed by already strict visa requirements, made even stricter in August, requiring a personal interview and more paperwork hurdles. On each side of the issue, there are legitimate and pressing needs, requirements and interests. On the one hand, in the context of post-September 11 imperatives with heightened security concerns, the U.S. must take measures to defend its citizens to minimize the terror threat and screen out those who pose a danger to our country. It must curb and control illegal immigration. Without such policy our government would be remiss and negligent.

On the other hand, the public dialogue, in the words of Ambassador Ushakov, and the exchange of our citizens, is seriously disrupted by such policies which prevent travel by good and legitimate visitors who should be allowed to travel - tourists, students, business people, scientists, faculty members and the like. While the U.S. doesn't intend to become xenophobic and close itself off to the world, this can become an unintended consequence, and it is creating a public relations disaster outside our borders.

What is to be done? I have reached the conclusion that ultimately the visa system must be phased out and eliminated. Our travel relations with Russia must be normalized. The visa system is a carry over from the Cold War. We do not need a visa to go to the UK, France or Germany. Why do we need one to go to Russia now? Why do they need one to come here? These fundamental questions must be evaluated in the context of our new strategic relationship with Russia, one strengthened in recent years by dialogue and initiatives from Bush and Putin; our shared interests in the war on terror; and the desire for future cooperation. The present visa regime is cumbersome and unnecessary for both sides. Americans also face a mountain of discouraging paperwork and bureaucracy when they want to visit Russia. Russia should be treated like any European country, with passport access, and simplified travel. This is a necessary and basic condition for trade and investment expansion.

Meanwhile, a special "fast-track" commercial processing system is required to expedite business travel between both countries. Special cooperation is needed to define and implement such a "fast-track" system between the State Department, Commerce Department, and their counterparts in Russia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Trade and Economic Development. We must be able to move business travelers smoothly between both countries to minimize the negative and punitive effects of the current restrictive policies on the business community. If we cannot travel, we cannot trade, and dollars are lost to unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles. The visa issue constitutes a major trade barrier at this time. Moreover, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow is seriously understaffed to handle the volume of visa applications they receive, and so require a greater budget allocation and a better appreciation in Washington of their requirements and staffing needs.

The seriousness of visa problems and its negative spin-off effects should be a top agenda item at the upcoming Bush-Putin summit in September. Removing unnecessary obstacles for legitimate people conducting legitimate business, education and recreational pursuits is essential to future positive and productive U.S.-Russian relations. □



Dr. Deborah A. Palmieri