

WTO Talks Will Stretch Into May

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Talks to join the World Trade Organization will extend into May 2011, a Russian official said Tuesday, implying that they will run beyond the spring session of the WTO's top body, which approves membership.

Maxim Medvedkov, Russia's chief WTO negotiator, said talks with the trade body could be wrapped up by the summer, meaning that Moscow's 17-year-old membership bid could still be approved before crucial elections in Russia and the United States.

Medvedkov told Reuters that the last round of informal talks in Geneva reviewed changes to a so-called Working Party report that had to be made after Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan set up a tripartite customs union. "We have reviewed nearly two-thirds of all changes.

"The next informal consultations we will have in March, and then we will probably need another one to complete work on the report," he said in an interview. "Most likely it may happen in May or June."

The report serves as the basis for a membership bid but must be approved by the WTO's General Council, which convenes every two months. The next session of the Council takes place in July.

Kremlin economic advisor Arkady Dvorkovich said recently that Russia aims to wrap up negotiations by the spring session of the Council at the start of May. Otherwise, he said, it would have to wait until the fall session.

President Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy have all said Russia can join the trade group this year.

A failure to push through the accession in fall 2011 may delay the Russian membership until 2013.

There were no other unresolved questions between Russia and the United States as well as the European Union except for agricultural subsidies, he added.

He noted that smaller countries were raising some new issues sensing that the accession process was entering the final stage but declined to go into details.

Medvedkov said Georgia, which threatened to block the accession over customs controls at the border between Russia and two Georgian breakaway regions, took part in the consultations but this time did not raise any issues.

Russia has repeatedly dismissed Georgian demands to have customs officers at the border it does not control as "political", saying they have nothing to do with international trade and therefore should not be taken into consideration.

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