

Biden Lukewarm on Putin's Visa Idea

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U.S. Vice President Joe Biden speaking at the American Chamber of Commerce event at Moscow State University on Thursday. **Igor Tabakov**

(Scroll down to watch U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's speech in its entirety.)

In his final public appearance in Moscow, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden on Thursday chose to ignore a stunning proposal to cancel visas between his country and Russia and instead stressed how rule of law could attract investors.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin voiced the idea of visa-free travel during talks just hours before Biden's speech at Moscow State University to U.S. and Russian businesspeople, State Duma lawmakers and students.

Moscow had never before brought up the issue of abolishing visas with Washington, at least at such a high level.

In support of the proposal, Putin said the abolition of visas would kill old stereotypes

in bilateral relations.

"We would turn a very important page in our past and start all over again," he said. "It would create an absolutely new moral atmosphere" between the countries.

The move — also widely seen as a potential catalyst for tourism and business — would be "historic" if reached before the European Union agrees to visa-free travel with Russia, Putin said. Moscow and Brussels have been negotiating an end to visas with slow progress.

As Putin spoke, Biden interjected by saying, "Good idea." The remark prompted Putin to add that Biden could help promote the proposal as a senior member of the U.S. administration and someone who has "weight" in Congress.

Biden replied ambiguously.

"Mr. Prime Minister, in case you haven't noticed, there's a real difference between being president and vice president," he said, according to a transcript of the remarks on the White House web site. "The very good news is the president and I agree 100 percent on the need to continue to establish a closer and closer relationship."

During the university speech, which was part of an investment conference organized by the American Chamber of Commerce, Biden focused on other measures that could spur commercial ties.

He said potential U.S. investors often thought badly of Russia's investment climate, including judicial protection of property rights.

"It may be unfair, but that's the perception," he said, calling for a "bold and genuine change."

In what raised concerns about Russia's legal system, he went on to name the case of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in custody after accusing police of corruption. He also recalled — mispronouncing former Yukos chief Mikhail Khodorkovsky's name — that the United States had criticized his second trial, which ended in December in a conviction.

Building stronger commercial ties is the next challenge for both governments, he said, after the policy of a "reset" put political relations on the mend and paved the way for U.S. majors such as PepsiCo, Chevron and ExxonMobil to expand their business in Russia recently.

"Our trade and investment is not where it should be," he said. "We got to do better. And I believe we can."

Even though Biden didn't mention the visa proposal, attendees of the investment conference didn't regard the prospect of free travel as unrealistic.

"I am an American who has lived here for almost 20 years," said Peter Reinhardt, a partner at Ernst & Young in Moscow. "I can't recall a moment when the environment was better for such a discussion than it is now."

He added that visa-free travel was an excellent long-term goal.

David Yakobashvili, president of the Russian-American Council of Business Collaboration, said he was hopeful. Natalya Barsegiyan, chief financial officer at the U.S. chain Yum! Restaurants in Moscow, said the idea was a bit premature, but "that's where we should go."

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