

McFaul Speaks Up for Relaxed Visa Regime

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U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul is giving renewed attention to a visa facilitation agreement with Russia that has been held up in parliament since the start of the year.

"With the new agreement, it will soon be easier to get a visa for longer durations — if the Duma will ratify it," McFaul [said](#) Thursday at the International Travel and Tourism Exhibition.

The State Duma has so far not taken up the document, which was finalized between Moscow and Washington in November but needs parliamentary ratification under Russian law.

Lawmakers of the ruling United Russia party say they want to wait until the next U.S. administration takes office in January 2013.

The agreement would make three-year multiple-entry visas standard issue for both

countries, and it would do away with written invitations.

That is a much bigger step for Russia, which issues visas only for the indicated duration of stay and upon invitation. The United States already gives one- or two-year visas to successful applicants, provided they pass an interview with officials.

McFaul also said that in 2011 the United States issued 221,888 visas to Russians, more than at any time in history and 27 percent more than 2010.

"I look forward to welcoming even more Russians to the United States in 2012," he [wrote](#) on his LiveJournal blog.

The refusal rate for Russian applicants last year was 10.3 percent, just slightly above the 10.1 percent in 2010, [according](#) to State Department statistics.

McFaul also advertised his native Montana, saying it is "the nicest place in the United States, second only to California," where he and his family have their permanent home.

Also present at the exhibition was an extra stand for Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, U.S. Pacific territories that recently scrapped visa requirements for Russians.

Perry Tenorio, of the Marianas Visitors Authority, said Russian visitors are in high demand.

"They stay longer and spend more than most Asian visitors," he said.

Other exotic destinations at the tourism fair were Syria and Iraq. Although Iraq is seeing a trickle of visitors, tourism has come to a complete halt in Syria since the bloody fighting between government and opposition forces broke out last year.

Yassar Kiwan, who runs Allied Tours in Damascus, said he had gone to Berlin's ITB fair in the past but decided to come to Moscow this year because Russian visitors are his biggest hope.

"They will be the first to come back. They're not afraid," Kiwan said.

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