

No Visas for Accredited Olympic Members

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While many sports fans wishing to visit Sochi for next February's Winter Games will have to get a visa to enter the country, Olympic officials will not.

Andrew Mitchell, a spokesman for the International Olympic Committee, said all "accredited people" will not need a separate visa. "As part of the bid process for all Olympic Games, all bidders must guarantee that the Olympic accreditation card acts as a visa during the period of the Games," Mitchell said.

Accreditation cards are usually issued to athletes, coaches, media and support staff. For last year's London Olympics, they were also given to a "small number of representatives from high-level global sponsors," according to a report on the globalvisas.com site.

It was unclear Thursday how many foreign accreditation holders and visitors are expected to attend the Sochi Games. The IOC referred all questions to the Russian Organizing Committee,

which said in an e-mailed reply that some 150,000 people will be accredited – including about 13,000 media representatives and an unspecified number of volunteers.

The overall number of foreign accreditation card holders for the London Summer Games was given at 40,000, just over half of which required visas to Britain.

The overall number of foreign visitors for the 2011 Olympics and Paralympics was 590,000, 420,000 of whom visited primarily for the games, according to figures by Britain's Office for National Statistics.

However, Winter Olympics figures tend to be much lower. The last games in Vancouver in 2010 were attended by 6,500 accredited athletes and team officials and 10,800 media representatives, according to figures by the Vancouver Organizing Committee.

Unlike for the FIFA World Cup in 2018, for which President Vladimir Putin has pledged visa-free entry for ticket holders, the government has not made any such promises for foreign visitors for the Olympics.

By contrast, the Foreign Ministry threatened the European Union with retaliation last fall if no visa waiver agreement with the Schengen group of states was reached before the Sochi Games.

EU officials retorted that they will not accept “artificial deadlines” while both sides implement a so-called common steps program, which is a condition for visa waiver negotiations to begin. They have also said Moscow could easily lift its visa restrictions unilaterally for the games.

Citizens from most European and many Asian and African countries need visas to enter Russia, that are typically issued single-entry and strictly for given travel dates. A visa facilitation agreement with the United States that was reached last year stipulates that visitors receive three-year multiple entry visas.

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