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Prospects for Liberalizing Visa Regime between Russia and China

VLADIMIR PETROVSKY

Dr. of Political Science, Chief Research Fellow of the RAS Institute of Far Eastern Studies, RIAC Expert

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Prospects for Liberalizing Visa Regime between Russia and China

In the context of the development of Russia–China relations, special attention should be paid to visa regime liberalization between Russia and China or its complete abolishment. In addition to the positive influence it would undoubtedly have on the business climate of the two countries, especially in cross-border and inter-regional cooperation, it would also significantly improve the conditions for cultural and civilizational dialogue. Analyzing international experience, as well as economic and political significance that a visa-free regime would have for modern Russia will provide insight into the issue.

Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Aspects of the Visa-Free Regime for Russia

The visa regime is one of the most significant factors in determining the economic competitiveness of a country, especially in the tourism and hospitality industry, as well as its image abroad and how it projects its “soft power.”

According to the *Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI)* by the World Economic Forum (WEF), Russian visa requirements are among the most stringent in the world. In 2015, Russia ranked only 120th out of 140 countries in terms of visa requirements.¹ Its ranking in 2017 was slightly worse (120th out of 136). In comparison, the rankings for the former Soviet countries were as follows: Azerbaijan – 77, Ukraine – 78, Armenia – 95, Tajikistan – 98, Kyrgyzstan – 112, Kazakhstan – 113 and Moldova – 119.²

According to the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index by the World Economic Forum, Russian visa requirements are among the most stringent in the world.

At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation is working to ensure that Russian citizens, especially those with regular passports, enjoy the right of visa-free entry to the largest number of countries. According to the *Henley & Partners Visa Restrictions Index 2017*, Russian citizens have visa-free access to 106 countries (51st out of 104 countries),³ and the number continues to grow.⁴

Representatives of the Russian tourism industry are constantly calling for liberalizing visa regime for foreign citizens travelling to Russia. Strict visa requirements constitute a barrier to entry into the country, since the processing of a Russian visa is an expensive and complicated procedure that takes a long time. Given the interest in increasing revenue from tourism in Russia, it would be wise to relax visa requirements. However, according to the tourism industry representatives, Russia focuses on the proceeds from visa-issuing, which generates large revenues and is a monopoly of the government.⁵

The Strategy for the Development of Tourism of the Russian Federation until 2020 envisions an increase in the flow of foreign tourists into the country to 40 million visits per year.⁶ To achieve this goal, the Federal Agency for Tourism (Ros-turizm) recommends simplifying border formal-

ABOUT AUTHOR:

Vladimir Petrovsky, Dr. of Political Science, Chief Research Fellow of the RAS Institute of Far Eastern Studies, RIAC Expert

¹ The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2015 // World Economic Forum, 2015, p. 430.

URL: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/TT15/WEF_Global_Travel&Tourism_Report_2015.pdf

² The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2017 // World Economic Forum, 2017, p. 287.

URL: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TTCR_2017_web_0401.pdf

³ The Henley & Partners Visa Restrictions Index 2017. URL: https://henleyglobal.com/files/download/hvri/HP_Visa_Restrictions_Index_170301.pdf

⁴ Visa-Free Regime for Entry into Foreign Countries for Citizens of the Russian Federation Who Possess Diplomatic, Service and Regular Passports // Consular Information Portal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

URL: http://www.kdmid.ru/info.aspx?it=%2FSpisok_stran_s_uproshchennym_poryadkom_vyezda.aspx&lst=info_wiki (In Russian)

⁵ Why Doesn't Russia Simplify the Visa Regime Like Belarus? // BBC Russian Service. January 10, 2017.

URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-38570367> (In Russian)

⁶ Strategy for the Development of Tourism of the Russian Federation until 2020 // Federal Agency for Tourism. Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation.

URL: https://www.russiatourism.ru/data/File/news_file/2014/strategia.pdf?sphraseid=38705 (In Russian)

ties, significantly reducing visa fee, or making visas free.⁷ The strategy approved by the Government of the Russian Federation in May 2014 involves work on simplifying visa, customs and border procedures, including developing checkpoints and improving legislative base. The main emphasis is to be made not on visa-free traveling, but on simplifying the visa procedures.⁸

The introduction of visa-free transit is an effective measure for liberalizing visa regime, although this process has met with certain difficulties in Russia.

The List of Instructions Summarizing the Results of the State Council Presidium Meeting held on August 17, 2015, following the BRICS Summit, included “analyzing the practice of applying the norms on liberalizing visa regime for foreign citizens and submitting proposals on the possibility of visa-free entry and short stay of foreign citizens in the territory of the Russian Federation for tourist purposes (including transit) from BRICS countries.”⁹

The introduction of visa-free transit is an effective measure for liberalizing visa regime, although this process has met with certain difficulties in Russia. In May 2015, the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation suspended work on a bill that would allow foreigners to remain in Russia for 72 hours while in transit. The original plan was to allow visa-free transit for passengers arriving at 12 Russian airports, including three in Moscow – Sheremetyevo, Domodedovo and Vnukovo. The bill included a number of provisions: the Russian airport must be an intermediate point on the tourist’s route, and the flight must be operated by a Russian airline.¹⁰ According to the Ministry of Culture’s calculations, the introduction of the bill would have helped to increase the tourist flow into Russia by 40–60%, which in turn would have increased revenue from accommodation to 5.4 billion roubles per year, or, taking the multiplier effect into account,

15 billion roubles per year. In September 2013, a draft law was approved by the Government of the Russian Federation and passed the first reading at the State Duma, but the Ministry of Culture decided to suspend work on the bill for political reasons.¹¹

The most significant issues in the discussions on the visa regime are related to security. This much is evident from the lengthy negotiation process between Russia and the European Union on the introduction of a visa-free regime, which did not yield any results. In order to abolish visa regime, the countries must meet three main criteria:

- 1) illegal migration: none of the sides should view the other as a source of illegal migration;
- 2) border regime: the sides should, where possible, establish common standards and principles of the operation of border and customs services, and also ensure deeper cooperation between them;
- 3) national security and crime rate: a real and effective mechanism for the international fight against organized crime should be created between the sides.¹²

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Liberalizing visa regime, in particular transitioning to a system whereby visas can be issued electronically at border crossings, might complicate the work of the law enforcement agencies. However, the benefits that the country will receive from increasing the tourist flow should justify the introduction of special measures to address this issue, including the allocation of additional financial and technical resources.¹³

⁷ Head of Rosturizm Calls for Reducing the Entry Visa Fee to the Russian Federation // Interfax. February 15, 2017. URL: <http://www.tourism.interfax.ru/ru/news/articles/39335/> (In Russian).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ List of Instructions Summarizing the Results of the State Council Presidium Meeting // Official Website of the President of the Russian Federation. September 22, 2015. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/assignments/orders/50341> (In Russian).

¹⁰ Express Tourists Are Not Allowed into Russia Yet // Izvestia. May 19, 2015. URL: <https://iz.ru/news/586685> (In Russian).

¹¹ Visa-Free Transit to Russia Is Not Happening Right Now // Association of Tour Operators of Russia. May 21, 2015. URL: <http://www.atorus.ru/news/press-centre/new/30927.html> (In Russian).

¹² Ivanova, E. N. On the Issue of a Visa-Free Regime between Russia and the Countries of the European Union // Bulletin of the International Institute of Economics and Law. No. 1 (26), 2017, p. 50 (In Russian).

¹³ Rozinsky, I. A Visa-Free Regime Instead of Counter-Sanctions // Vedomosti. May 3, 2018. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/05/03/768387-bezvizovii-rezhim-antisantsii> (In Russian).

Some researchers find additional incentives for Russia to liberalize the visa regime amid the anti-Russian sanctions, seeing the unilateral abolition of preliminary entry visas for citizens of countries that do not pose a migration risk for Russia as a counter-sanction measure.¹⁴

Liberlization (or abolishment) of the visa regime would have a positive effect on Russia's image as an attractive country with significant tourist potential. This much was abundantly clear during the FIFA World Cup in Russia, when foreign citizens holding Fan IDs were granted visa-free entry to the country. Speaking at the closing ceremony, President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin noted that the government was planning to develop the most comfortable visa regime possible for football fans. As a result, visa-free entry under the Fan ID system was extended to December 31, 2018.¹⁵

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Preconditions for Abolishing Visas between Russia and China

Considerations regarding the financial and economic peculiarities of the visa regime and related security aspects concern Russia–China relations directly, where great efforts have already been made to liberalize the existing regime on both sides.

Such measures were taken, first of all, with regard to organized tourism. At present, more tourists travel to Russia from China than from any other distant country,¹⁶ while China is the

second most popular distant destination among Russian tourists.¹⁷ Chinese tourists spend an average of \$2,000–3,700 per person when visiting Russia.¹⁸ And it is not only shopping that attracts them to the country – cultural and environmental tourism are also gaining popularity.

The foundations for the regulation of organized tourism between Russia and China were laid by the Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Visa-Free Group Travel,¹⁹ and were further developed during the events held as part of the Russia–China Cross-Years of Tourism in 2012–2013. During the 16th Session of the Russia–China Commission for Humanitarian Cooperation in October 2015, representatives of the tourism authorities approved changes to the rules for visa-free group travel between the two countries. The term of stay for tourist groups was increased from 15 to 21 days, and the minimum number of people required to make up a tourist group was reduced from five to three.²⁰ The new format of visa-free travel for groups has made such trips more accessible and created conditions for increasing tourist flows.

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The proposal for the both sides to abolish entry visas for tourists was made by the Chairman of the Russia–China Committee for Friendship, Peace and Development Boris Titov, who appealed to the President of the Russian Federation to consider the possibility of introducing a visa-free regime between Russia and China and suggested initiating talks at the highest level on

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Provisions on Regulatory Legal Acts on the Personalized Fan Map // Fan ID. URL: <https://www.fan-id.ru/index.html?locale=EN>

¹⁶ Selected Statistical Information Calculated in Accordance with the Official Statistical Methodology for Estimating the Number of Incoming and Outgoing Tourists // Federal Agency for Tourism. Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. URL: <https://www.russiatourism.ru/contents/statistika/statisticheskie-pokazateli-vzaimnykh-poezdok-grazhdan-rossiyskoy-federatsii-i-grazhdan-inostrannykh-gosudarstv/vyborochnaya-statisticheskaya-informatsiya-rasschitannaya-v-sootvetstvii-s-ofitsialnoy-statisticheskoy-metodologiyey-otsenki-chislavvednykh-i-vyezdnnykh-turistskikh-poezdok/> (In Russian).

¹⁷ Chinese Tourism to Russia Hits Record Numbers in 2017 // The Moscow Times. March 6, 2018. URL: <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/chinese-tourism-to-russia-hits-record-numbers-in-2017-60717>

¹⁸ Chinese Tourists Spent \$1bn in Moscow in 2015 // GB Times. February 5, 2016. URL: <https://gbtimes.com/chinese-tourists-spent-1bn-moscow-2015>

¹⁹ Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Visa-Free Group Travel // Travel Association "World Without Borders". URL: <http://www.visit-russia.ru/soglashenie-mezhdu-pravitelstvom-rossiyskoy-federatsii-i-pravitelstvom-kitayskoy-narodnoy-respubliki> (In Russian).

²⁰ Oleg Safonov Delivers Report at 16th Session of Russia–China Commission // Federal Agency for Tourism. Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. October 12, 2015. URL: <https://www.russiatourism.ru/news/9430/> (In Russian).

a visa-free tourist exchange. He also called on the Chinese side to support his proposal.²¹

According to a statement made by then the Director General of the Department of European–Central Asian Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China Gui Congyong on November 10, 2015, China is seeking to introduce a visa-free regime with Russia in order to increase tourist flows between the countries.²²

The current simplified regime does not meet the demands of Chinese tourists wishing to visit Russia.²³ According to the China National Tourism Administration, Chinese individuals have difficulties visiting Russia because of the high visa cost: visa centre fees are \$50; and consular department commission and the services of intermediaries are roughly the same amount. That is, the total paid is approximately \$150.²⁴

At the same time, tourism in organized groups entails serious losses for the Russian side. These losses are connected with the use of shadow schemes of payment for tourist services, bypassing Russian travel agents, hotels and shops. Abolishing the visa regime for tourist trips is one of the few possible ways to change the current situation, as it will encourage individual travel without the need of intermediary companies and allow Chinese tourists to plan their own routes without the need for a travel guide.²⁵

The tourism agencies of the two countries have already held several rounds of negotiations on revising and re-signing the agreement on visa-free travel for tourist groups. Russia and China intend to continue negotiations on the details of the agreement in order to reach a consensus as soon as possible and sign a document that meets the requirements of the growing tourist flow and satisfies modern trends.²⁶

To date, the most significant measures taken to simplify the visa regime between Russia and China are related to the Free Port of Vladivostok. In March 2017, a law was adopted on simplifying the procedure for foreign tourists and investors entering the Russian Far East.²⁷ According to the document, citizens of 18 countries, including China, can now visit five regions in the Russian Far East where the Free Port regime operates under a simplified procedure, namely Primorsky Krai, Khabarovsk Krai, Sakhalin Oblast, Chukotka Autonomous Region and the Kamchatka Peninsula. To obtain a visa, foreign citizens have to go to a special website and fill out a form. Once the visa has been granted, it can be picked up at the border when entering the country, without any consular fees. Visas are valid for 30 days from the moment the visa application is approved and grant entry to the Russian Federation for up to eight days.²⁸

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The simplified visa regime in the Free Port of Vladivostok was to start operating on January 1, 2016, but the legal framework and regulatory means for introducing the simplified entry procedure were not developed in time, and the launch date was postponed on multiple occasions.²⁹

From January 1, 2018, electronic visas can be used to enter the Kamchatka Peninsula and Sakhalin Oblast via 11 checkpoints. In addition to the two checkpoints currently operating in

²¹ Russia– China Committee for Friendship, Peace and Development Proposes Full Abolition of Visa Regime for Tourists // RIA Novosti, March 17, 2015. URL: <https://ria.ru/politics/20150317/1052999336.html> (In Russian)

²² China Seeks Visa-Free Travel With Russia // Sputnik. November 10, 2015. URL: <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201511101029861522-china-russia-visas/>

²³ China Promises to Seek Introduction of Visa-Free Regime with Russia // Interfax. November 10, 2015. URL: <http://www.interfax.ru/world/478321> (In Russian)

²⁴ China Asks Russia to Relax Visa Regime // RBC. June 14, 2016. URL: <http://www.rbc.ru/ratings/business/14/06/2016/575ad4af9a79470d9896571e> (In Russian)

²⁵ Zuenko, I. Yuan Circulation in Russia. Why Income from Chinese Tourists Slips by the Budget // Carnegie Moscow Center. March 13, 2018. URL: <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75598> (In Russian)

²⁶ In China, Talked about the Negotiations with Russia on a New Agreement on the Abolition of Visas for Tourists // International News. August 2, 2018. URL: <http://tellerreport.com/news/--in-china--talked-about-the-negotiations-with-russia-on-a-new-agreement-on-the-abolition-of-visas-for-tourists--HJOv9qgB7.html>

²⁷ FZ No. 67439-7 “On the Introduction of Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation with Regard to the Regulation on the Specifics of Foreign Nationals Entering the Russian Federation through Checkpoints on the State Border of the Russian Federation Located in the Free Port of Vladivostok, Their Stay in and Departure from the Russian Federation” // State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. URL: [http://www.asozd2.duma.gov.ru/main.nsf/\(Spravka\)?OpenAgent&RN=67439-7](http://www.asozd2.duma.gov.ru/main.nsf/(Spravka)?OpenAgent&RN=67439-7) (In Russian)

²⁸ Residents of 18 Countries Will Be Able to Visit the Free Port of Vladivostok under a Simplified Visa Programme // Official Website of the Administration of the Primorsky Krai and the Executive Authorities of the Primorsky Krai. April 18, 2017. URL: <http://www.primorsky.ru/news/126462/> (In Russian)

²⁹ Visa Simplification Stopped in the step from Switching on // East Russia. August 1, 2017. URL: <https://www.eastrussia.ru/en/material/vizovoe-uproshchenie-zamerlo-v-shage-ot-vklyucheniya/>

Vladivostok, rail (Pogranichny, Khasan and Makhhalino), road (Poltavka and Tury Rog) and sea (Zarubino, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Korsakov and Posyet) checkpoints are to be added in 2018.³⁰

On August 19, 2018, foreign nationals who had been issued an electronic visa to enter Russia were granted the right to do it via any airport in the Russian Far East. The law was set to come into effect on September 1, 2018, when the border checkpoints at five airports were due to start operations: Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky (Yelizovo Airport), Blagoveshchensk, Khabarovsk (Novy Airport), Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk (Khomutovo) and Anadyr (Ugolny Airport).³¹

At the same time, the practice of visa-free transit of Russian citizens in China is also developing. This practice should be expanded on a reciprocal basis.

At the same time, the practice of visa-free transit of Russian citizens in China is also developing. This practice should be expanded on a reciprocal basis, both in terms of visa validity periods and entry points (cities and international airports). A visa-free transit is currently in place for citizens of Russia and other countries arriving at various airports in China, allowing them to stay for 24, 72 or 144 hours.³² At present, Russian nationals have the right for visa-free transit up to 144 hours via the capital region (Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei Province), Shanghai Region (Shanghai and Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces) and Northeast China (Liaoning Province).³³

Prospects for Russia and China's Transition to a Visa-Free Regime

The measures taken to date cannot completely solve the problem of simplifying travel for Russian and Chinese tourists wishing to visit the

other country, which hinders the development of trade, economic, tourism, cultural and people-to-people ties.

Russian and Chinese fears about the introduction of a visa-free programme essentially boil down to security issues. They include the ability of the relevant authorities of the two countries to control the flow of illegal immigrants into their respective countries, which can lead to undesirable consequences, namely, the creation of new threats of international terrorism and the growth of crime and illicit business activities. In this connection, it would be wise to establish a special communication channel between the security agencies of the two countries under the auspices of the security councils of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China.

The transition to a visa-free regime between Russia and China should be seen as a gradual process, accompanied by the introduction of simplified procedures for issuing visas and multiple-entry permits which, with very few exceptions, are not part of the current Russia-China visa regime.

In this connection, the principles of issuing Schengen visas to Russian citizens deserves attention here: no visa fees for students and researchers; issuing multiple-entry visas (for 1–5 years) to certain categories of citizens visiting the Schengen Area as part of educational, research and cultural exchanges.

It would also be wise to take the experience of Russia and South Korea into account, which simplified their respective visa regimes with regard to the other country prior to the introduction of a visa-free programme. Thus, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, the country granted visa-free entry for Russian citizens who had visited the country at least four times over the past two years, or more than ten times in total.³⁴

³⁰ Almost 2800 Visas Issued to Foreigners to Visit Primorsky Krai // Novosti Vladivostoka. September 29, 2017. URL: <https://www.newsvl.ru/society/2017/09/29/163463/#ixzz5PO1TvsWy> (In Russian).

³¹ Law on Entering Russian Federation via Airports in Russian Far East Comes into Force // TASS. August 29, 2018. URL: <http://tass.ru/obschestvo/5469230> (In Russian).

³² Visa-Free Air Transit via China – 72, 24 and 144-Hour Transit // China Highlights. URL: <https://www.chinahighlights.ru/viza-v-kitay/kitay-bez-vizy.htm> (In Russian).

³³ 144-Hour Visa-Free Transit in China // Travel China Guide. URL: <https://www.travelchinaguide.com/tour/visa/free-transit-144-hours.htm>

³⁴ Information on Obtaining a Visa // Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the Russian Federation. URL: http://overseas.mofa.go.kr/ru-ru/brd/m_7334/view.do?seq=749059&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=1 (In Russian).

The transition to a visa-free regime between Russia and China should be seen as a gradual process, accompanied by the introduction of simplified procedures for issuing visas and multiple-entry permits which, with very few exceptions, are not part of the current Russia–China visa regime.

As part of preparations for the Russia–China Intergovernmental Agreement on the Work of Confucius Institutes in Russia and Russian Language Institutes in China, issuing student visas that provide the right to engage in temporary employment should be also given attention. This measure would significantly ease the life of Chinese students in Russia and Russian students in China.

It is also necessary to pay attention to the interest of Russian regions bordering Chinese provinces in improving the situation at border crossings. For example, a proposal was put forward at the Trans-Baikal International Forum of Inter-regional and Cross-Border Cooperation held in Chita in November 2015 that was supported by the Governor of the Trans-Baikal Territory on the creation of “green corridors” at border crossings for simplified passport and customs control procedure for tourists, as well as on attracting business resources to improve the infrastructure and install additional equipment at these crossings.³⁵

The issue of significantly simplifying trips in both directions between Russia and China as part of cross-border and inter-regional cooperation, including these and other measures (such as expanding the geographical coverage of cross-border tourism and simplifying the rules on a reciprocal basis), could be considered within the framework of the development of partner relations between neighbouring Russian and Chinese regions, as well as within the framework of the Russian–Chinese Intergovernmental Commission for Cooperation and the Development of the Russian Far East and Baikal Region and the Northeast of the People’s Republic of China.

It is also necessary to pay attention to the interest of Russian regions bordering Chinese provinces in improving the situation at border crossings.

Given the increased level of interest in this issue, it would be wise to develop a Road Map for Simplifying the Visa Regime between the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China, with the establishment of a visa-free regime being the ultimate goal. The development of this road map should take due account of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Belarus and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Mutual Visa Exemption for Holders of Common Passports, which entered into force on August 10, 2018.³⁶

³⁵ Trans-Baikal International Forum on Cross-Border Cooperation Wraps Up in Chita // Chita. November 22, 2015.
URL: <http://www.visitchita.ru/ru/news/mejdunarodnoe-sotrudnichestvo/v-chite-podveli-itogi-zabaikalskogo-foruma-prigranichnogo-sotrudnichestva.html> (In Russian).

³⁶ Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Belarus and the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Mutual Visa Exemption for Holders of Common Passports // National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus. July 1, 2018.
URL: <http://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=101800037&p1=1&p5=0> (In Russian).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Sign an updated Russia–China agreement on visa-free travel for tourist groups as soon as possible.
2. Expand the practice of visa-free transit for Russian nationals in China and Chinese nationals in Russia on a reciprocal basis.
3. Expand the rules on the simplified procedure for tourists and investors entering the Russian Far East to other regions of the Russian Federation.
4. Simplify the procedure for issuing multiple-entry visas for Russian and Chinese nationals and increase their term of stay.
5. Resolve the issue of granting student visas on a reciprocal basis with the right to engage in temporary employment.
6. Greatly simplify mutual trips for residents of neighbouring regions in Russia and China as part of cross-border and inter-regional cooperation.
7. Study and adapt the practice of simplifying the procedure for Russian nationals obtaining Schengen visas, including free and multiple-entry visas.
8. Study and adapt the practice of simplifying the visa regime prior to the introduction of a visa-free programme, as was the case with Russia and South Korea.
9. Sign an agreement on the introduction of a visa-free regime between Russia and China along the lines of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Belarus and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Mutual Visa Exemption for Holders of Common Passports.

Notes



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Tel: +7 (495) 225 6283
Fax.: +7 (495) 225 6284
E-mail: welcome@russiancouncil.ru
119180, Moscow, Bol. Yakimanka St., 1.

www.russiancouncil.ru