

Russia, U.S. clear way to WTO deal

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Moscow and Washington have cleared the way to a deal on Russia's entry to the World Trade Organization and plan to sign it at an economic forum in Vietnam next week, Russia's economics ministry said Friday.

The two countries' delegations "have reached consensus on all the sensitive terms of the [accession] agreement," the ministry said.

Talks with the United States have broken down several times over differences on access of financial services companies to the Russian market, massive copyright violations in the country, and most recently on agriculture, specifically U.S. meat exports.

The ministry said the delegations are continuing the discussions to make sure that Russian Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref and U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab sign the agreement on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Hanoi.

Russia has, in turn, demanded Washington abolish the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which restricted trade with the former Soviet Union and remains in force for Russia despite having been lifted for many of its former Communist allies.

The move was under debate in the Republican-majority Congress, but experts say the amendment is unlikely to be scrapped under the Democrats, who won congressional elections this week. The Democrats have been more critical of Russia's potential entry to the global trade body.

Lifting the amendment is important for acquiring U.S. trade benefits, known as Normal Trade Relations (NTR), a major motivation for Russia, which has been negotiating membership in the WTO for over a decade already.

Russia has yet to secure the approval of Georgia and Moldova, energy-dependent former Soviet allies with whom it is locked in an ongoing diplomatic feud over breakaway regions. Georgia has threatened to block Russia's entry.

And Russia will still have to reach a multilateral deal with the 58-member Working Party on its accession to the WTO to bring national legislation and standards in line with international norms.

"Both parties seek to complete the process of Russia's accession to the WTO, and intend to make even more energetic efforts to that end," the Russian ministry said.

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