
Russia may join WTO next year says Russian official

RIA Novosti 11/3/2008

MOSCOW, March 11 (RIA Novosti) - Russia may conclude negotiations on joining the WTO by the summer and could become a full member in 2009, the director of the Information Bureau on Russia's Accession to the WTO said on Tuesday.

"If nothing unexpected happens, Russia will be a WTO member from January 2009," said Alexei Portansky.

Russia has been seeking membership of the World Trade Organization since 1993.

So far, Russia has concluded bilateral talks with over 60 states but still needs to complete discussions with the WTO members - Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Georgia - that have trade disagreements with the country.

Tbilisi earlier vetoed Russia's accession to the world's largest trade body.

Relations between the two former Soviet republics have rapidly deteriorated since the Western-leaning Mikheil Saakashvili came to power in Georgia in 2004.

The South Caucasus republic says it will cease to block Russia's WTO bid only after Moscow honors its 2004 commitment to close down its border checkpoints with Georgia's breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The two de facto independent republics recently appealed to Moscow for recognition of their sovereignty in the wake of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence on February 17.

Speaking on Georgia, Portansky expressed hope that "in the near future the sides could agree on these [border checkpoint] issues."

Russia's has already completed bilateral WTO talks with both the U.S. and the EU. Multilateral talks are underway now on agricultural support, export duties, veterinary matters and intellectual piracy.

Earlier it was believed that Russia would join the 151-member organization by the end of 2007. Portansky said: "We will complete talks by the summer of 2008 if no other states signal the necessity to hold additional negotiations."

In early February, Ukraine's president signed an agreement with the WTO clearing the way for Kiev's membership of the global trade body after 14 years of negotiations. Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko also pledged that Ukraine would not attempt to block Russia's admission to the organization.

However, Portansky did not rule out that Kiev could create stumbling blocks to Russia's WTO bid in the light of the countries' long-running natural gas dispute.

"I hope this will not happen," the official added.

The former Soviet allies partially resolved their gas dispute last week, agreeing that Ukraine would pay off some \$1 billion of its debt, after Russian gas monopoly Gazprom restored supplies, which were cut by 50% early last week.

Ukraine and Russia put off talks on a gas supply scheme for 2008 by one day on Tuesday until March 12.
