

Annex E.8.19

Public

Russia launches passport offensive

— PUBLISHED FEB 23, 2009 12:00AM

TIRASPOL (Moldova) Retired postal worker Maria Kozyrenko is a new citizen of Russia along with 135,000 others in Trans-Dniester alone.

Kozyrenko hasn't lived in Russia since the Soviet era. But she got her passport two years ago as part of the Kremlin's push to grant citizenship to hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians living in former Soviet countries, including Georgia, Moldova, Estonia and Ukraine.

“All our hopes are with Russia,” said Kozyrenko, as she hawked an old black coat at a flea market in Tiraspol, the capital of Trans-Dniester. “We hope that Russia will protect us.”

Russia has given passports to nearly 2.9 million former Soviet citizens since 2000, according to the Federal Migration Service. It does not break down the numbers between those who returned to Russia and those who still live abroad.

Some fear Moscow will use its growing expatriate communities to meddle in the domestic politics of countries near its borders, or as in the case of Georgia as an excuse for military intervention. But the Kremlin says it is granting passports to Russians abroad for humanitarian rather than political reasons, to help

Russians trapped in other countries after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Spokesman Alexei Sazonov pointed out that Western countries, such as Belgium, have conducted similar campaigns in the past.

“We have a non-confrontational foreign policy we don't need any conflicts,” Sazonov said. “At the same time to defend the rights of compatriots is a right countries have.”

The creation of communities of Russian citizens is already undermining Ukraine's entry into Nato and weakening Moldova as it looks to Europe. It also lets the West know that Russia wants to be reckoned with in what it considers its sphere of influence.

“This is a warning, a serious reminder that there are grounds for concern for those who don't recognise Russia's interests,” said Masha Lipman, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

For example, in recent years, the Kremlin has handed out tens of thousands of passports in the break-away Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It then in part justified its military incursion into Georgia last year by saying it was protecting Russians living abroad. Now, both South Ossetia and Abkhazia have strengthened political, economic and military ties with Moscow.

Similarly, the Kremlin subsidizes Moldova's separatist province of Trans-Dniester with cheap gas, funds pro-Russian youth movements, and pays poor pensioners a monthly \$10 addition to their pensions of \$60 to \$70

monthly \$10 addition to their pensions of \$00 to \$70.

“For Trans-Dniester, Russia is like the closest and dearest person – it's like our motherland,” said Alyona Arshinova, 23, a new Russian citizen and activist with a youth group sponsored by pro-Kremlin lawmakers in Russia. Posters of Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin adorn her college dormitory room.

About a fourth of Trans-Dniester's 550,000 people have already received Russian citizenship. And Trans-Dniester president Igor Smirnov, who has ruled this sliver of land since 1991, makes no secret that he wants the region to become part of Russia, even though the two don't share a border.

Another flashpoint is Estonia, a tiny Baltic nation of 1.3 million that prides itself on its tech-savvy population and Scandinavian efficiency. The Russian Embassy in the capital of Tallinn said about 3,700 passports were issued in the 12 months before Oct 30, 2008 more than three times the number during the same period a year earlier.

This is partly because Estonia, a member of the European Union and Nato, has made clear it's nervous about its large ethnic Russian population. Denied automatic citizenship after Estonia's independence in 1991, many of these Russians are so-called “non-citizens” who must pass a language exam before receiving an Estonian passport.

A lot don't bother, due to the time and expense of studying the grammatically complex Estonian language. For them, a Russian passport is just as enticing, if not more so. Immigration numbers show more than 96,200 Russian citizens and 111,700 non-citizens living in

Estonia.

Residents of Narva, a predominantly ethnic Russian city in northeastern Estonia, said that if they hold a Russian passport and an Estonian non-citizen's passport, they can travel from Lisbon, Portugal, to Vladivostok without a visa.—AP

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