Beyond Passportisation in Eastern Ukraine: President Zelenskiy is Put to the Test

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How newly-elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy responds to Moscow’s provision of Russian passports to residents in occupied Donbas will not only set the tone for his administration’s foreign policy, but could seriously unsettle Putin’s project of consolidating a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region.

By 10 July 2019, over 20,000 Ukrainian residents of the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics had completed their applications to receive Russian passports under an expedited procedure. According to Ukrainian Deputy Minister on the Affairs of the Temporarily Occupied Territories Heorhiy Tuka, more than 1,000 people have already received Russian citizenship. The number of applicants is actually quite marginal, considering that an estimated 3 million people reside in Luhansk and its sister republic of Donetsk, territories that were de facto cut off from the rest of Ukraine following the start of a war in spring 2014. But the pace of incoming applications is still remarkable, since over 500 residents of the Luhansk self-proclaimed republic had applied only three weeks after Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree to simplify the granting of Russian citizenship to residents of Luhansk and Donetsk. According to a poll mentioned by Kirill Alzinov, the spokesman for migration affairs in the Russian interior ministry, almost 90% of these residents would be interested in applying, possibly to enjoy the same privileges as Russians to visa-free travel and access to Russian state social benefits. To many in Ukraine and its Western embassies, the move has come as yet another blow to the endangered Minsk Peace Accord.

The Russian head of state did not end there. On 1 May, Putin signed another decree to extend the simplified procedure to any citizen of Ukraine who does not hold citizenship of another state, and stateless persons who were born and permanently resided in Crimea but left the peninsula before the annexation of 18 March 2014. He earlier suggested that he may offer a simplified procedure to all Ukrainian citizens. The ‘passportisation’ of the Kremlin’s intervention in Ukraine has been widely discussed in reference to Georgia. The simplified process for granting Russian passports to populations in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia turned out to justify Russian military intervention in 2008 on behalf of protecting Russian citizens. ‘Next time Putin wants to send his soldiers to Ukraine, he won’t even need to pretend’, Deputy Minister Tuka foresees.

Zelenskiy’s reformist program sends a strong message to Russian civil society and opponents to the Kremlin: a political alternative to corrupt autocracy is possible. The concern is real. However, the Russian president’s initiatives do not make for anything new. Russia has deployed troops in Ukrainian territory since 2014. The Kremlin has engaged soldiers in active combat several instances. As for the passportisation policy, the possibility to obtain Russian citizenship for Ukrainian citizens has existed since the breakup of the Soviet Union, in spite of a formal constitutional requirement for Ukrainian citizens to hold only one citizenship. However, it is undeniable that Putin’s passportisation policy does represent an increased security threat to Ukraine. More than a blow to peace talks, it is a further infringement on its sovereignty. It also enhances the chances of war criminals being able to escape Ukrainian justice.

Yet, it is arguable that the passport initiative is first and foremost a test for newly-elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy. Putin signed his first decree only three days after Zelenskiy’s electoral victory, a candidate who promised to reboot peace negotiations. The Kremlin has coupled their passport initiative with new trade and energy sanctions. Such moves must be understood as a set of constraints placed onto the young head of state. Therefore, some elements of the solution to the issue lie in the response that is yet to be formulated by Zelenskiy.

Passportisation as a Tool of Imperial Strategy

The strategic benefits of passportisation are clear. Many 19th-century Russian tsars asserted their right to protect Orthodox citizens of the Ottoman Empire – a policy that contributed significantly to the outbreak of the Balkan Wars of that period, political scientist Agnia Grigas writes. It fits nowadays into Putin’s imperialist ambitions to reconstitute...
a coherent Russian-speaking and Russia-dominated geopolitical space dubbed ‘Russkiy Mir’, or, ‘Russian World’. According to Putin, Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians are ‘one single people’. The passport policy mirrors soft power, as do so-called humanitarian missions in the Donbas. It has also proved more aggressive, through energy disputes and information warfare and military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine. The case studies of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Donbas allows one to draw parallels with potential destabilisation scenarios in Belarus and the Baltic states, all with sizeable Russian minorities.

In the case of the simplified granting of passports to Donetsk and Luhansk residents, this imperial policy is supported by absurd claims, such as Putin adviser Serhiy Glazyev’s warning of a ‘replacement’ of local populations by Jews from Israel. There is a need to protect Russian brothers beyond Russia’s borders, officials claim, as they justify the annexation of foreign territories. The idea behind this is to create the conditions for a normalisation of the situation in case of an official annexation, which may, eventually, be acknowledged by the international community, or at least some countries. The recent US recognition of Israel’s claim over the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel since 1973, serves as a clear demonstration that Russia’s sovereignty over Crimea, Donbass, Abkhazia and South Ossetia may only be a question of time. The case of Transnistria is slightly different because of its territorial discontinuity with Russia.

However, given the fact that Russian intervention has been an ongoing reality for over five years, Kiev now has clear evidence of its neighbour’s aggressive violation of its sovereignty. In the case of a renewed military intervention, it may now be easier for Ukrainian authorities to call on Western partners for assistance. Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s reaction in 2008 to direct Russian attacks in Georgia was much swifter than German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s and then-French President François Hollande’s during the 2014 Russian covert operation in Crimea and Donbas.

Watching Zelenskiy’s Reaction

As mentioned above, the delivery of Russian passports to Ukrainian citizens had been a legal possibility since the early 1990s, so Putin’s decree is nothing new. The timing of his decision is much more important than its content. ‘The decision was not spontaneous’, Putin commented. The signing of the first decree on 24 April was a reaction to Zelenskiy’s election on 21 April. Labelled a pro-Russian agent by his critics, Ukrainian oligarch and close Putin associate (the Russian president...
is godfather to his daughter) Viktor Medvéchuk forwarded Zelenskiy a series of offers from the Russian authorities, including lower prices for gas imports, possibly freeing 24 Ukrainian sailors, and renewing trade relations. The goal of such gestures of good will was understood in Kiev as a sign that the Kremlin is looking for a way to resolve ongoing tensions between the two countries on their terms: establishing a special status for separatist Donbas; the federalisation of Ukraine; or abandoning Kiev's claim to Crimea in exchange for these Russian concessions.

‘Next time Putin wants to send his soldiers to Ukraine, he won’t even need to pretend’

Zelenskiy surprised his critics in his public appearances by sticking to strict principles of territorial integrity and national sovereignty. As a consequence, Russia announced new trade and energy sanctions. It banned exports of coal, oil and petroleum products to Ukraine, and imports of some types of pipes, paper, cardboard and clothes from the country. Medvéchuk declared his offers were no longer valid, and the passport decrees soon followed. Gazprom appears to be set on not renewing a contract for transiting gas through Ukraine to European countries, which is due in early 2020. Ukraine’s Naftogaz stands to lose $3 billion a year, clearly a heavy blow to Putin’s regime. The recent return of the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has been heavily criticised in Ukraine as a ‘betrayal’ by Western powers. One of Zelenskiy’s tasks is to show his determination in maintaining an international coalition favourable to Ukraine, the way his predecessor Petro Poroshenko had intended.

A clear response to passportisation will sway a number of other debates in Ukraine. Ethnic minorities such as Hungarians, Romanians, Poles and Bulgarians also benefit from simplified procedures for acquiring passports of their parent states. Yuriy Hrimechak, adviser to the minister of temporarily occupied territories, warned Russian passports holders that they could lose their Ukrainian citizenship, and this threat echoed among ethnic minorities. The question of dual citizenship also has implications for members of the Ukrainian diaspora worldwide. In his inaugural speech, Zelenskiy called upon Ukrainian migrants overseas to come back to invest and live in their motherland. Introducing dual citizenship protections into the constitution may be one the incentives the president could offer to make this happen.

Kiev now has clear evidence of its neighbour’s aggressive violation of its sovereignty

Aside from another demonstration of the Kremlin’s imperialist policy, new pressures from Russia are a reaction to the existential threat facing Putin’s regime. In the same way that the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution threatened the relevance of Putin’s autocratic regime, Zelenskiy’s reformist program sends a strong message to Russian civil society and opponents to the Kremlin: a political alternative to corrupt autocracy is possible. Back in 2014, the annexation of Crimea, the destabilisation of Ukraine’s eastern regions and the following economic crisis all gravely limited the revolutionary potential for change. Likewise, the latest pressures from the Kremlin create a serious burden on Zelenskiy’s capability to deliver on his promises of modernising the economy and improving Ukrainians’ living conditions. To have a democratically-elected Russian-speaking president succeed in his attempt to radically transform a post-Soviet republic would deal a blow to Putin’s regime. To prevent such a scenario may be the Kremlin’s endgame, beyond its imperialist policy.

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