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Europe Grants Moldovan Citizens Visa-Free Travel

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BRUSSELS — Moldovan citizens will no longer require visas to travel to the EU beginning on Monday, as the bloc presses ahead with deeper ties with East European nations in defiance of Russia.

Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine are all seeking tighter links with the EU as part of an Eastern Partnership with the bloc, which allows for closer trade and business ties without full EU membership.

In response to the Ukraine crisis, the EU has said it will accelerate the partnerships and from Monday, all citizens of Moldova with a biometric passport can travel visa-free to Europe's Schengen zone, the European Commission said on Sunday in a statement. The Schengen zone includes most EU countries and some non-members such as Norway and Switzerland.

Ukraine's quest for EU ties triggered the current crisis in relations with Moscow, dividing the nation between those seeking to look West and those wanting to stay in Moscow's orbit.

Following Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in March, NATO has cited Moldova's disputed Transdnestr region as a possible next target.

Moldova's pro-European prime minister Iurie Leanca has said EU-inspired reforms and visa-free travel for Moldovans are the best hope of resolving the "frozen conflict" of Transdnestr, arguing they would make Moldova more attractive to those in the rebel region.

EU partnership deals depend on certain reforms. In its statement, the Commission, the EU's executive body, said Moldova had reformed its interior ministry, modernized its border police and made progress towards ensuring equality and human rights.

A narrow strip of land near the Ukrainian border, Transdnestr has not been recognized by any state as independent, but it is home to Russian troops and half-a-million people — 30 percent of them ethnic Russians — who look to Russia as their patron, much like the ethnic Russian majority in Crimea.

The Commission statement did not spell out whether people living in Transdnestr would be eligible for visa-free travel and no official was immediately available for comment.

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