UN Ambassador: Russia is Trying to Create 'Ukrainian Transdnestr'

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People, who have fled the fighting in the eastern regions of Ukraine, stand in line to get their meal at a Russian refugee camp.

UNITED NATIONS — Ukraine's ambassador to the UN has accused Russia of handing out passports in eastern Ukraine — replaying a tactic it has used in the past to shape frozen conflicts in Georgia and Moldova to its own advantage.

The appearance of self-proclaimed states run by Moscow loyalists in eastern and southern Ukrainian regions — akin to Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Moldova's Transdnestr secessionist movements — could also provide Moscow with a land connection to Crimea, supposedly easing the financial burden of maintaining the peninsula it annexed this spring, while giving Russia leverage over the Kiev government.

"We are seeing the same thing we observed in [South] Ossetia, in Abkhazia," or in Transdnestr, Ukraine's Ambassador to the United Nations Yuriy Sergeyev said Thursday

in an interview with The Moscow Times.

"This is happening on the territory of a sovereign Ukraine which indicates that Russia plans to entrench itself on the long term, and signifies an attempt to create a Ukrainian version of Transdnestr," he said.

Russia brought in troops to impose a truce in the fighting between Transdnestr and Moldova in 1992 and the region has remained an unrecognized Russian-speaking state ever since.

Sergeyev said Ukraine's security services and local residents in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions had reported Russia was handing out passports on "a large scale."

The statement echoes an earlier claim made by Ukraine's Interior Ministry adviser Anton Gerashchenko this week that Russia was trying to boost citizenship in the region.

Separatists have also demanded that eastern Ukraine switch its currency from Ukraine's hryvnia to the Russian ruble starting in mid-September, Sergeyev said.

This "cuts off those territories from Ukraine financially as well," he said.

If Russia is indeed handing out passports, it could be an attempt to lend a share of legitimacy to Moscow's interference in Ukraine's East.

Russia in March annexed the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea arguing it was protecting the region's Russian-speaking population and says the inhabitants of eastern Ukraine need to be defended from "fascist" and "executioner" government forces.

By increasing the number of Russian citizens in eastern Ukraine, Russia would "create a kind of a legal foundation for why it is intruding and whom it is protecting," Sergeyev said.

"Claiming that it is protecting all Russian-speakers already sounds absurd. But protecting its citizens, on the other hand — that's a different story."

As the conflict in Ukraine has unfolded, the theory that Russia is not interested in a quick settling of the conflict has gained traction. Moscow has neither annexed the region, as it did with Crimea, nor denounced the separatists or closed the border to stem the flow of weapons and fighters to rebels, as Ukraine and Western governments have demanded.

It is a scenario that Russia has been accused of playing out more than once over the past decades.

Russia publicly commiserated with the grievances of separatists in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transdnestr, tacitly encouraging their secession drive, lambasted the nations' governments for their treatment of separatist citizens, handed out Russian passports, and moved in as a "peacekeeper" to keep the conflicts from flaring up but also ensuring that the regions are not reclaimed by government forces.

Moscow has consistently denied its forces are involved in eastern Ukraine — a stance that allows Russia to maintain plausible deniability, while an annexation or a full-fledged war with Ukraine would rule that out.

As the crisis in Ukraine unfolded, several Russian media have put Transdnestr back into the limelight, with some casting it as an idyllic state, despite the region's dire financial troubles, and suggesting that the path may be attractive for Ukraine's separatist "Novorossiya," or New Russia, to follow.

In a report from Transdnestr's capital Tiraspol this summer, Kremlin-friendly news website Gazeta.ru said the city "does not resemble the capital of an unrecognized tiny state surrounded by unfriendly neighbors, but [resembles] a typical quiet southern Russian city with small homes entwined by ivy."

"The newest history of Transdnestr is an example of what happens when a region manages to achieve de-facto independence," the article said. "To a certain degree, one can say that Transdnester's example is what could happen in self-proclaimed Novorossiya in the case of a favorable scenario of effective secession from Ukraine."

That outcome is one that Ukraine's government is anxious to avoid, particularly following President Petro Poroshenko's election this May on a pledge to preserve his country's territorial integrity.

" [The creation of] a Ukrainian Transdnestr [is] something we are not going to allow, and we are appealing to our international partners to prevent this kind of a development," Sergeyev told The Moscow Times.

While NATO or Western governments would not provide weapons to Ukraine because the country is not a member of the defense alliance, Sergeyev said, the country is seeking "non-lethal" military equipment such as communication devices for the Ukrainian army, and tougher political and economic pressure on Russia, including new sanctions that would target its crucial oil and gas industries.

Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed a seven-point peace plan for Ukraine this week, calling, among other things, for a withdrawal of government forces "to a distance that excludes the possibility of artillery shelling of inhabited areas."

That proposal has been discarded as essentially sealing separatist control over the region that government forces had nearly reclaimed before Russian troops allegedly opened a new front in the conflict last month.

Russia's proposal for a cease-fire are "a clumsy attempt to place the mask of [a] peacemaker on the face of the aggressor," Sergeyev said.

Ukraine's Prime Minister Arseny Yatsenyuk similarly dismissed the plan as an attempt to "hoodwink" Western governments and to create a frozen conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Others have argued Russia could still be aiming for a full-fledged annexation of eastern Ukraine or that Putin's perceived uncertainty could be caused by a schism in his entourage about how to handle the crisis.

While the uncertainty that has surrounded the crisis might seem to indicate a lack of a defined Russian plan, Ukraine and Western governments have repeatedly insisted that Moscow is not in a position to cast itself as "peacekeeper."

"An aggressor can't simultaneously perform the role of [a] peacemaker," Sergeyev told reporters earlier on Thursday.

"They created humanitarian problems, and then they decided to provide humanitarian aid," Sergeyev said. "It's just a mask."