

Putin Simplifies Russian Citizenship Process for Eastern Ukrainians

April 24, 2019



Mikhail Pochuyev / TASS

President Vladimir Putin has signed a decree making it easier for residents of separatist-controlled eastern Ukraine to obtain Russian passports and citizenship, the Kremlin [said](#) on Wednesday.

In 2017, Putin [signed](#) an executive order recognizing the passports from the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics as valid in Russia. The move was widely [regarded](#) as the first step toward the official recognition of the two breakaway regions.

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Starting Wednesday, Russia's Interior Ministry is instructed to consider applications from eastern Ukraine within three months of submission. Putin enacted the new measures "to protect the human and civil rights and freedoms" of the area's [3.7 million](#) residents, the Kremlin said.

Putin signed the decree 24 hours after Ukraine's election commission officially declared political novice Volodymyr Zelenskiy the runaway winner of the country's presidential elections.

Simplified citizenship for Donetsk and Luhansk residents was made possible after Putin was [granted](#) the authority to select foreigners eligible for Russian passports under a law that entered into force on March 29.

Separatist rebellions broke out against Ukrainian rule in both regions in 2014. Moscow provided military help for the separatists, according to evidence gathered by Reuters, though Russian officials have denied providing material support.

Large swathes of the two regions are now under the de facto control of the Moscow-backed rebels, while Kiev says it is determined to re-assert its control, a position backed by most Western countries.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin denounced Russia's move on Wednesday.

The decision "to issue passports in the occupied Ukrainian territories is the continuation of aggression and interference in our internal affairs," he tweeted, urging Ukrainians living under occupation not to apply for such passports.

Putin said on Wednesday it was unacceptable that residents of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions had no rights, but he said Moscow did not want to create problems for the new Ukrainian leadership.

"We don't have any desire to create problems for the new Ukrainian leadership," Putin said, explaining the passport move.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

Update: On May 1, Putin signed a decree expanding the list of Ukrainians and citizens of some other countries eligible for fast-tracked Russian passports, the Kremlin said.

The Kremlin on Wednesday published an expanded list of those eligible to acquire Russian passports within three months, including those who live in "certain territories" of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

The law is effective from the day of signing, May 1.

The list of those eligible for fast-tracked Russian passports also includes Ukrainians who lived in Crimea before it was annexed by Russia from Ukraine in March 2014.

The list also cited citizens of Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen and Syria who were born in Russia during the Soviet era.

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