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Putin: Nothing Wrong With Us Giving Passports to East Ukraine Residents

By Reuters

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Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday there was nothing wrong with easing rules for residents of Ukrainian rebel regions to receive Russian passports, a decision that prompted condemnation and calls for more sanctions against Moscow.

Speaking to reporters at the end of a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Putin said Poland, Romania and Hungary grant citizenship to their ethnic kin outside their borders and he saw no reason why Russia could not do the same.

"It caused a negative reaction. That's strange," Putin said.

"How are Russians in Ukraine worse than Romanians, Poles or Hungarians? I don't see anything unusual here."

Putin signed an order on Wednesday saying that residents of the Donestk and Luhansk

regions of Ukraine were entitled to apply for Russian citizenship under an expedited procedure to be processed within three months.

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The United Nations Security Council met to discuss the issue on Thursday at the request of Ukraine. The 15-member body is unable to take any action as Russia is one of five permanent veto powers.

The European Union condemned Russia's move on Thursday, calling it another attack by Moscow on Ukraine's sovereignty.

"The timing ... shows Russia's intention to further destabilize Ukraine and to exacerbate the conflict," the spokesperson for the EU's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said in a statement.

Ukrainian President-elect Volodymyr Zelenskiy, who won a presidential election in a landslide on Sunday, said the Russian move showed Moscow was waging war in Ukraine and called for additional sanctions against Russia.

Rebellions broke out against Ukrainian government rule in east Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014 shortly after a pro-Russian president was toppled in Kiev in a popular revolt.

Moscow, which also annexed Ukraine's Crimea region that year, provided military help for the separatists in the east, according to evidence gathered by Reuters, although Russian officials have denied providing material support.

Five years of war have killed 13,000 people. A ceasefire signed in 2015 ended major combat but deadly clashes still occur regularly. The United States and the EU have maintained financial sanctions against Russia since 2014 over its Ukraine policies.

Putin said on Thursday that Moscow was willing to work with Zelenskiy if he implemented the full terms of the 2015 truce agreements, brokered in the Belarus capital Minsk with international support. Both sides accuse each other of violating the agreements.

"If those coming to power in Kiev find the strength to implement the Minsk agreements, we will do all we can to cooperate and we will do everything to normalize the situation in southeastern Ukraine," Putin said.

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