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Kyiv Post: Moscow Says it Issued Nearly 200,000 Russian Passports in Ukraine's Donbass

By Kyiv Post

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Eight months after simplifying the procedure of acquiring a Russian passport for residents of Ukraine's eastern Donbass region, Russia announced that it has granted over 196,000 citizenships to Ukrainians.

The figures came from the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Russian TASS news agency reported on Jan. 1.

Moscow says it is protecting the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, a claim that Kiev and its Western partners hotly contest. In April 2019, Russia announced it would offer citizenship to Donbass residents through a simplified procedure, a provocative move that sparked outrage in Ukraine.

According to TASS, over 136,000 Ukrainians living in the separate backed parts of Donbass and about 60,000 residents of Ukrainian-controlled areas have become Russian citizens since April.

The agency reported that over 200 Ukrainians were denied Russian passports. They include people previously deported from Russia and individuals with an outstanding criminal conviction or who are currently being prosecuted in or outside Russia.

Earlier, on Dec. 9, Russian Interior Minister Vladislav Kolokoltsev told Russian news agency Interfax that 125,000 Donbass residents had acquired Russian citizenship at that time. He also said that, since April, 160,000 Ukrainians had applied to receive Russian passports.

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That suggests that, in less than a month, 36,000 more Ukrainians applied for citizenship, while Russia granted around 71,000 passports over the course of 22 days.

The Kyiv Post could not confirm the figures reported by TASS or Interfax.

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the decree implementing the simplified citizenship procedure on April 24. He called it a humanitarian measure to help Donbas residents, who he claimed lacked basic human rights in Ukraine.

Vladislav Surkov, a Russian presidential aide who reportedly curates the Donbas for the Kremlin, said the decision was "the duty of the Russian Federation before those speaking and thinking in Russian."

Russia's move was met with harsh criticism in Kiev and in Western capitals. The Estonian foreign ministry even announced that it would refuse to recognize Russian passports granted to residents of Donbass.

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