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Russia Reverses Decision to Issue Internal Passports in Abkhazia

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The Russian Embassy in Sokhumi. **Petr Magera / Flickr**

Russia's diplomatic mission in the Georgian breakaway territory of Abkhazia said Friday that it would stop issuing Russian internal passports out of "respect" for the local authorities, coming just a month after Moscow launched the initiative.

"The issuance of these documents to the citizens of the republic of Abkhazia will be moved to Russian territory," the Russian Embassy in Sokhumi said in a statement.

Earlier this week, Abkhazia's parliament said senior security and foreign policy officials held a closed-door meeting to discuss legal issues surrounding the presence of Russian internal passport and driver's license offices, operated by Russia's Interior Ministry, in the Black Sea region.

"No decisions were made at the meeting," the parliament said.

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Abkhazia, wedged between the Black Sea and the Caucasus Mountains, is recognized internationally as part of Georgia but has been under de facto Russian control since the 2008 war.

Around 190,000 people in the region of 224,000 hold both Abkhaz and Russian citizenship after nearly 15 years of Moscow's passportization policy.

Since Abkhazia's independence is recognized by only five UN member states — Nicaragua, Russia, Syria, Tuvalu and Venezuela — obtaining Russian citizenship, and with it a Russian international passport, is often the only way residents of the region can travel abroad.

Russia's Ambassador in Sokhumi, Mikhail Shurgalin, claimed that "most" Russian-Abkhaz dual citizens do not currently have internal passports that would allow them to access Russian state social services.

Shurgalin said local authorities and President Vladimir Putin greenlighted the opening of Russian internal passport and driver's license offices in Abkhazia.

Putin signed a decree last year allowing citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, another Georgian breakaway territory, to obtain Russian internal passports inside the regions themselves. He also simplified the process of Russian naturalization for residents of both territories.

Shurgalin singled out Abkhazia's opposition leader Kan Kvarchia for speaking out against the opening of Russian internal passport offices, which he said forced Russia's Interior Ministry to recall its staff from the territory.

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