

A Shield of a Passport: Moscow Uses Russian Citizenship as a Tool for Recollecting the Empire's Lands

by *Andreas Umland*

One of the main justifications for Russia's recent invasion of Georgia was that it had to protect its citizens from what Moscow's leaders chose to call "genocide" by the Georgian army in South Ossetia. The reasons behind Russia's embrace of this particular argument seems to be that the protection of one's own citizens has been a common rationalization for military action abroad by many countries, including major Western powers. Russia thus apparently follows internationally-accepted modes of behavior: governments have to protect their citizens, using military means if necessary. What is lost in this at first glance at the legitimate line of argument is not only that many South Ossetians became citizens of the Russian Federation relatively recently (imagine, moreover, Moscow's reaction if Germany would start offering German passports to the inhabitants of the Kaliningrad Region and protecting these new Germans' "rights and dignity"). Even more important is the fact that there is a subtle difference between, on the one hand, a state's protection of the lives and dignity of its citizens merely living in another country, and, on the other hand, a government defending citizens who are engaged in creating their own independent state on the territory of another country. When in recent years many South Ossetians chose to become citizens of Russia, they, consciously or not, changed the nature of their political aspirations.

When they were still citizens of Georgia or stateless, they were involved in a dispute about the status of their territory with the government of Georgia. Thus their activities reminded of the strive for independence by many of the world's national minorities, including many in Europe like the Basques in Spain or Kosovars in Serbia. Once most inhabitants of South Ossetia -- including members of the "government" of this unacknowledged state -- became official subjects of the Russian Federation, their political project of an independent South Ossetian republic transformed into a Russian imperialist enterprise, and changed the role of Russia's "peacekeepers" in South Ossetia. Citizens of all countries should live safely and with dignity in other countries. But should a country's government allow foreign citizens to create an independent state within the internationally recognized borders of its territory? And should a country's government let such foreign subjects do so under the umbrella of an armed "peacekeeping" force sent by the same state that provided the separatists with foreign passports? Even the most ardent defenders of the rights of national minorities might not agree.

These distinctions may be seen as hair-splitting. In fact, they go to the heart of the problem. In various recent opinion polls in Russia, more than 50 percent of the respondents supported the "Russia for Russians" slogan. By "Russians," these respondents mean not the citizens of the Russian Federation, but only ethnic Russians (russkie), preferably with a "Slavic face."

Cryptic or open racism has deeply infiltrated the Russian society. Racist arguments have made their way into both violent youth sub-cultures and prime-time television shows. Many Russians would see representatives of both ethnic Georgians and Ossetians as equally alien elements when meeting them within the ethnic Russian heartland. The idea that the ethnic Russian population is deeply sympathetic to the fate of the South Ossetians in Georgia, even if they are citizens of the Russian Federation, is unconvincing. Having been largely silent for many years about what the Russian federal armed forces have been doing to the Chechens since 1994, Russians should not take offence if the outside world does not give much credibility to their alleged humanitarian alarm about what is happening in the Caucasus these days.

What is driving Russian behavior with regard to South Ossetia, Abkhazia or Transdneestr is not only and not so much genuine concern for the peoples of these unacknowledged states. Moscow's provision of Russian passports for the populations of these territories is designed to accelerate local conflicts, create a pretext for Russian involvement (including military), and – as in the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia – provide a justification for territorial annexation. Moscow wants to use a gray area of international law – a state's right to protect, even by violent means, its citizens abroad – for revisionist aims. One could imagine the application of such a scheme not only in the former Soviet Union's "failed states" like Georgia and Moldova. Russian passports might be also handed out to people living on the Crimea, in Northern Kazakhstan, or at Narva – territories mostly populated by ethnic Russians whose "lives and dignity" may need Moscow's protection in the future too.

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