

## **Armenians Enticed by Russian Passport Offer**

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Continuing exodus prompted by poor prospects at home could now accelerate.

As Armenians queue up to take out Russian citizenship under newly simplified rules, local analysts warn that this will boost the continuing exodus from the country.

On April 22, President Vladimir Putin approved legislation allowing anyone who lived in the Soviet Union, or is descended from someone who did, to apply for a Russian passport. Even people with family roots in the pre-1917 Russian Empire are eligible.

Applicants have to pass a Russian-language test, and can then acquire a passport in just three months.

Worryingly for a small nation like Armenia, they must then renounce their own citizenship, rather than holding two passports.

Almost immediately after Putin's announcement, queues formed outside the Russian embassy in Yerevan. People stood in line for hours to hand in their documents.

For many Armenians, a passport for Russia is a practical way of making it easier to live and work there, as so many of them do.

The government's migration agency says that between 80,000 and 120,000 people travel to Russia every year to do seasonal work, returning home for the winter. Some stay longer – the agency says between 900,000 and one million are there for a period of two or three years.

They send large sums of money home to their families, helping support the struggling Armenian economy. Central bank figures show that 86 per cent of the two billion dollars in bank transfers to Armenia last year came from Russia.

Some of these labour migrants – who are mostly men – will end up staying on indefinitely and putting down roots. Another 30,000, among them some of Armenia's brightest and best, make a positive decision to emigrate. That figure, too, is rising, and once again Russia is the destination chosen by two-thirds of them.

"If the law provides permanent residence, then of course it increases the risk of higher numbers of people emigrating," Gagik Yeganyan, head of the State Migration Service, told IWPR.

Outside the Russian embassy, Anush Balyan, a 22-year-old from the southern Ararat region, told IWPR why she wanted a Russian passport.

"That way we can avoid all the hassles of getting deported. It's better to get a passport right from the outset," Balyan said. "It also means I'll be living with everyone else in my family. My father and three sisters live in Moscow, and my husband and I have submitted our papers to the embassy so we can go and be with them."

Work-wise, Balyan sees no choice in the matter.

"It's easier to get a job in Russia. I'm a doctor and I only earn 60,000 drams [150 US dollars] a month here. That's barely enough," she said. "In Russia, I could earn that in a day."

Hovhannes Sahakyan, a member of parliament from the ruling Republican Party, downplayed the likely effects of the relaxed Russian passport rules.

"It won't affect seasonal workers. If someone who goes off to work for the summer but has family here takes out citizenship, all he's doing is making his life there easier... but he'll still come back to Armenia," he told IWPR. "We need to focus on those sections of society that leave to stay forever, instead of those who just go for the season."

Many experts who watch emigration trends would disagree, and are concerned that the net loss of Armenian citizens will accelerate.

Both Russia and Armenia allow dual citizenship in principle, but the new scheme offered by Moscow does not – Armenian and other nationals must renounce their citizenship to take advantage of it.

Hranush Kharatyan, an ethnographer with the Armenian Centre for Genealogical Studies, predicts a major demographic shift.

“People will be a bit cautious about this for the first couple of years, and then when the process picks up pace and is working well, it may gain momentum. As a result, more people will leave the country,” she told IWPR.

Since 2006, Moscow has been offering fast-track naturalisation to Armenian nationals under a programme called “Compatriots”. Around 26,000 people have applied to move to Russia, although only 1,500 have gone so far.

According to Kharatyan, “The new law slightly alters the way Compatriots is implemented. That programme set out where people must live, required them to live there for a certain period, and gave them money to do so. The new law lacks this conditionality, so people can choose for themselves where they live in Russia.”

“I’m convinced that the number of people leaving for Russia is going to increase,” Kharatyan added.

In the context of Moscow’s newly assertive policy in the region, its offer to convert citizens of other former Soviet states into its own raises some questions about its intentions. However, Ruben Yeganyan, head of the Armenian Social-Demographic Initiative group, believes the Russian government is desperate to gain new citizens in order to curb population decline at home.

“Russia needs people. It needs a labour force, people of reproductive age – parents – to address its fertility problem,” he said. “As for the Russian language test, it’s clear that all you need is a basic knowledge.”

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