Weaponizing Citizenship: Passportization as a Security Strategy in the Russo-Ukrainian War

This article analyzes Russia's passportization primarily as an international security issue rather than solely as a human rights violation. It argues that coercive naturalization fuels a crisis inherently characterized by legal uncertainty, heightens vulnerability to statelessness, and poses structural obstacles to post-war reintegration. To adequately assess the short-, medium-, and long-term security implications of passportizations, we must consider international humanitarian law, human security frameworks, and employ risk analysis methodology in regards to both Ukraine and the international order. Such examination concludes that passportization, if left unchecked, threatens sovereignty norms, normalizes legal manipulation under occupation, and establishes a dangerous global precedent for future conflicts.

Introduction: Passportization and Contemporary Conflict

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that contemporary warfare extends far beyond conventional military engagements. In addition to artillery, drones, and armored advances, the Russian administration has weaponized law and bureaucracy, using administrative governance to cement its claims over Ukrainian territory. One of Russia's most consequential, yet notably underanalyzed, dimensions of non-kinetic warfare has been the systematic and coercive distribution of citizenship status to civilian populations in areas under Russian control. Through expedited naturalization procedures, Russia has effectively leveraged citizenship as an administrative tool to regulate civilian life, compel compliance, and consolidate territorial claims.

Passportization refers to the mass conferral of citizenship by one state to residents of another state's territory. Unlike standard citizenship processes, passportization circumvents the authority of the occupied state, utilizing political pressures to compel compliance and legitimize external control. By classifying civilians as nationals, the occupying power lays substance to its claim over the occupied territories under the guise of protecting its citizens, and is able to justify prolonged military presence.[1] Hence, the boundaries between population management and territorial expansion become blurred.

Passportization Historical Precedents and Continuity

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow began to frame the millions of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers outside of the Russian Federation as compatriots of the nation. The purported need to protect—and therefore extend authority over—residents across the formerly Soviet diaspora became a matter of national Russian interest and dictated regional

[1]"Russian Passports Become Universal in Ukraine's Occupied Territories, through Force and Incentives," The Independent, March 15, 2024, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ap-ukraine-vladimir-putin-kherson-kyiv-b2513097.html.

foreign policy for decades to come. Over the past three decades, and with growing intensity as of 2014, Russia has continued to leverage citizenship policy to extend state influence beyond its borders—notably in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Crimea.[2] Post-2014 amendments to Russia's Law on Citizenship, further expanded in recent years, have institutionalized passportization as a method to fast-track dual citizenship for residents of neighboring states.[3] These measures have effectively provided Moscow with the legal and political pretext to assert intervention on behalf of "its citizens."

Coercion and Governance: Citizenship as Control

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, prompted an unprecedented scale of passportization efforts in captured territories. The coercive conditions under which passportization has been implemented have also escalated the conflict into the legal realm. In occupied Ukrainian territories, for instance, access to basic services, employment, and freedom of movement have been increasingly contingent on the acceptance of Russian citizenship. Refusal to do so has carried tangible risks, such as loss of property rights, denial of pensions, and in extreme cases, risk of deportation. By recasting civilians as nominal Russian citizens, Moscow instrumentalized citizenship as a tool of power, undermining the legal salience of international borders and securing a durable justification for prolonged intervention.

As common social benefits have been conditioned upon the possession of a Russian passport, citizenship status has become a prerequisite for basic survival. This coercive framework intensified in 2023, following legal decrees that reclassified residents without Russian citizenship as "foreign nationals." Such designation carries significant consequences through outlining restrictions on property ownership, escalating risk of deportation, and formally excluding Ukrainians unwilling to accept Russian citizenship from social protection.

Citizenship in the modern context thus operates as a power-play mechanism embedded within a military occupation. Civilians are forced to choose between material deprivation and the legitimization of Russian control through passport acceptance. These mechanisms illustrate the extent to which passportization has become a weaponized legal instrument. Even while records of purported consent may be cited to legitimize future control, the process remains inherently coercive.[4]

Legal Constraints and Violations

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[2] "Russia's Policy of Passport Proliferation," Royal United Services Institute, May 1, 2020, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-policy-passport-proliferation.
[3] "Russia Threatens Ukrainians Who Refuse Russian Citizenship," Human Rights Watch, May 16, 2023, https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/16/russia-threatens-ukrainians-who-refuse-russian-citizenship.
[4] Ukrinform, "Russian Passports Imposed on Ukrainians under Occupation Have No Legal Force – Ukraine's Justice Ministry," Ukrinform, September 30, 2024, https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3911071-russian-passports-imposed-on-ukrainians-under-occupation-have-no-legal-force-ukraines-justice-ministry.html.

It is crucial to note that international humanitarian law places constraints on the specific conduct of occupying powers, especially regarding the legal status of civilian populations. The Hague Convention of 1907, for instance, explicitly prohibits a controlling power from compelling inhabitants of an occupied territory to proclaim allegiance to that authority.[5] Accordingly, occupation is regarded as a temporary factual condition that neither confers sovereign authority nor permits the reshaping of a population's political or legal identity. The Fourth Geneva Convention further reinforces this principle in requiring occupiers to respect existing institutions and laws within the occupied territory, disallowing strategic alteration of the existing national identity.[6]

The 1907 Hague Regulations, as well as the Fourth Geneva Convention, remain at the cornerstone of modern international law regarding occupation, and are largely accepted as binding both under treaty law and customary international humanitarian law (IHL). Their core principles, particularly an emphasis on inherent respect for existing laws and institutions of the occupied territory, have been continuously reaffirmed in international jurisprudence. In July of 2025, the European Court of Human Rights delivered a ruling in *Ukraine and the Netherlands vs. Russia* that found Russia responsible for several violations and abuses of power amidst occupation. The ruling further confirmed the concurrent applicability of IHL and human rights law and relied on occupation law to appropriately assess Russia's conduct.[7] Yet, the Court's findings also underscore a persistent gap between legal acceptance and compliance, especially in the cases of prolonged occupations where political considerations have driven a departure from these norms, in spite of formal recognition.

Russia's campaign of mass passportization stands in direct opposition with international law, which stipulates that consent to accept citizenship must be genuine and free from coercion. Under the conditions in Russia-occupied Ukraine, where access to food, healthcare, and employment is heavily mediated by Russian authority, coercion nullifies citizens' capabilities to make free, voluntary choices.. As such, it is imperative that coerced citizenship acceptance under such conditions be evaluated not as an isolated administrative act, but rather examined within a broader structure of inherent dependency and vulnerability.

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[5] Ukrinform, "Foreign Ministry: Ukraine Does Not Recognize Coercive Russian Passportization in Occupied Crimea," Ukrinform, June 16, 2020, https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/3046402-foreign-ministry-ukraine-does-not-recognize-coercive-russian-passportization-in-occupied-crimea.html.

[6] ICRC, "International Humanitarian Law and Policy on Occupation," ICRC, 2025, https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/occupation#text940425.

[7] "European Court of Human Rights: Russia Has Been Held Accountable for Widespread Human Rights Violations in Ukraine," Human Rights Center Antonio Papisca, July 20, 2025, https://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/en/news/european-court-of-human-rights-russia-has-been-held-accountable-for-widespread-human-rights-violations-in-ukraine.

Passportization also intersects with international norms concerning statelessness. Individuals who accept Russian citizenship under occupation face risk of non-recognition by Ukraine and other states. Those who refuse to naturalize are left administratively invisible and deprived of the rights and benefits.

The Ukrainian government's legislative response has reflected a clear recognition of these dangers. They have created a draft law criminalizing forced passportization and invalidating the legal effects of Russian-imposed citizenship in an effort to preserve Ukrainian nationality and encourage future accountability for coercive practices.[8] Although this response is unlikely to be enforceable under current conditions, it highlights an evolving legal dispute over the interpretation and application of international law. This underscores passportization as a relatively new phenomenon that directly challenges longstanding international legal norms regarding sovereignty and the protection of civilian populations under occupation.

On the international stage, the Russian government has largely framed the passportization of Ukrainians as a 'simplification of citizenship,' presenting it as a procedure with the primary intention of extending Russian social benefits and legal status to members of occupied territories. Ukraine and most Western states have rejected this narrative, condemning forced passportization as a violation of sovereignty as well as international humanitarian norms. Kyiv has asserted that the passportization documents issued under occupation have no legal force and should only be recognized as infringement of international law and territorial integrity. [9]

Legal and Human Security

Russia's passportization effort generates a slow-onset crisis, as many of its destabilizing effects, such as contested legal status and complications for migration, will emerge over decades. Large populations who leave occupied land with Russian documents and reside in territories restored to Ukrainian governance will do so under contested legal status. Those who may choose to cross borders will face citizenship disputes and travel as displaced persons.

These dynamics pose significant challenges to post-war reintegration. A lack of citizenship recognition will undermine political participation, access to public services, and even property restitution. A future Ukrainian administration will likely be ill-equipped to process passport

[8] "Statement on the Draft Law on Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on Ensuring the Exercise of the Right to Acquire and Retain Ukrainian Citizenship (Reg. No. 11469) ➔," Statement on the Draft Law on Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on Ensuring the Exercise of the Right to Acquire and Retain Ukrainian Citizenship (Reg. No. 11469) – Громадський холдинг "ГРУПА ВПЛИВУ," February 14, 2025, https://www.vplyv.org.ua/archives/9806.

[9] "Council Adopts Decision Not to Accept Russian Documents Issued in Ukraine and Georgia - Consilium," Consilium Europa, December 8, 2022, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/08/council-adopts-decision-not-to-accept-russian-documents-issued-in-ukraine-and-georgia/.

document validation and properly assess the degree of coercion involved in naturalization, undermining effective judgements and administrative certainty.

From a human security perspective, lasting legal ambiguity created by passportization exposes civilians to a range of concrete vulnerabilities. Individuals with contested citizenship may be unable to access healthcare, pensions, and could face barriers to property ownership and employment. Legal uncertainty also increases the risk of exploitation, as occupying authorities may leverage documentation gaps to restrict civilians' rights. These effects will likely persist far past active hostilities, complicating reintegration and leaving populations susceptible to ongoing political and economic manipulation.

Risk Analysis

The broader security implications of passportization—discussed in terms of legal, human, and governance challenges—can be categorized across short-, medium-, and long-term horizons.

Short-Term Risks

In the immediate term, passportization heightens civilian vulnerability. Residents who refuse Russian citizenship face denial of essential services and potentially face forced displacement or deportation, which would destabilize frontline regions and burden neighboring states. Simultaneously, individuals who accept Russian passports often are subject to compulsory military service obligations, raising additional security concerns and further violating international community norms.[10]

Medium-Term Risks

Across the medium term, passportization produces overlapping legal systems, as millions of individuals who hold Russian documents reside in areas pending return to Ukrainian governance, fueling prolonged legal uncertainty. Competing citizenship claims will also overwhelm a future Ukrainian administration by generating administrative friction over documentation, voting rights, and property ownership. Such dynamics will slow reintegration and deepen social fragmentation within an already fragile nation.

On an international level, large-scale passportization sets a dangerous precedent. If left unchallenged by the international community, it may normalize similar practices among other states, destroying norms governing civil protection and nationality under occupation.

Long-Term Risks

Over the long term, passportization threatens the erosion of sovereignty itself. Altered legal identities constrain Ukraine's ability to fully exercise authority over recovered territories and

[10] Lori Hinnant et al., "Russia Forces Ukrainians in Occupied Territories to Take Its Passports – and Fight in Its Army," AP News, March 15, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-occupation-passports-citizenship-c43bbd1107a27f70ed6a37097d5b9c59.

hinder a reconstituted cohesive political identity. Normalizing coercive naturalization risks diluting international legal standards and may solidify citizenship as a routine instrument of territorial revisionism.

By targeting populations rather than borders, passportization reshapes the foundations of post-war order. The danger lies well beyond Ukraine's immediate instability, but will reverberate as an attack on accepted international legal framework regarding constraints of state behavior during conflict. If citizenship manipulation becomes normalized or increasingly employed, civilians in future conflicts may find their legal identities subject to strategic redesign, threatening the notion of political belonging at its very core.

Mitigation Strategies

To properly mitigate the risks posed by passportization, anticipatory governance is essential. Ukraine's reintegration planning should address citizenship status as an infrastructure priority, alongside physical reconstruction and institutional reform. Preparing transitional documentation mechanisms and ensuring clear pathways for legal status restoration is imperative.

The systematic preservation of evidence documenting coercion and conditionality associated with passportization is equally important. Maintaining records is critical for future accountability efforts and may be needed in potential proceedings before international courts. Further, international partners engaged in reconstruction and stabilization should embed legal identity restoration in their financing and governance frameworks, recognizing that sustainable recovery is dependent on actively resolving citizenship ambiguity.

Conclusion: Passportization and the Future of International Security

Russia's passportization campaign in occupied Ukrainian territories constitutes a profound challenge not only to international humanitarian law but also to human security. By weaponizing citizenship, Moscow has introduced a slow-burning crisis with effects that will extend far past the cessation of armed conflict. Coerced naturalization and rights deprivation undermine reintegration, destabilize governance, and weaken global norms regarding occupation.

Understanding passportization as a structural security risk is of utmost importance to maintaining, and reaffirming, current international security norms. How Ukraine and the international community at large respond will shape not only the nation's post-war future, but the resilience of international norms and civilian protection in twenty-first-century conflict.

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