

Russians, Chinese keen to buy EU passports from Malta

By Andrew Rettman



BRUSSELS - Russians, Chinese, and people from the Middle East have shown the most interest in Malta's sale of EU passports so far.

A spokeswoman for Henley & Partners, the British firm handling the controversial passport scheme, told EUobserver that "over 200" people from 30 different nationalities have applied since it got up and running in early 2014.

She added that: "The main geographic areas from which applicants originate are the MENA [Middle East and north Africa] region, Russia, China, and South East Asia".

She also said the well-heeled applicants will bring in more than €200 million in foreign investment to the tiny Mediterranean state.

None of them have passed due diligence tests, designed to weed out shady characters and being carried out by Henley and by Maltese authorities, so far.

Henley noted that, on average, 25 to 30 percent of candidates fall by the wayside in similar schemes in other countries. It added that applicants also have to be resident, in legal terms, for at least 12 months before they get their Maltese and EU citizenship, so that "the first new citizens ... will become eligible in Spring of next year".

Henley says the programme will close once it fulfills its quota of 1,800 new passports.

But each of the 1,800 "main applicants" can see the candidate add children, parents, and grandparents for an extra fee.

The new Maltese citizens will buy the right to live and work in all 28 EU states and to travel without visas to 69 non-EU countries, including the US.

Malta's conservative opposition party has in the past criticised the scheme because, it said, it makes Malta look financially needy, undermines its appeals for EU solidarity on boat migrants from Africa, and because, opposition MPs claimed, Henley has a conflict of interest in both running the project and in taking a cut from the fees.

MEPs in Brussels and former justice commissioner Viviane Reding also attacked it because, they said, it cheapens the concept of EU citizenship.

But Reding's lawyers could find nothing in the EU treaty to stop it from going ahead, despite issuing vague threats.

For its part, Henley noted the figure of 200-or-so applicants over the past six months amounts to "significant early success".

But Malta's centre-left PM, Joseph Muscat, is currently flying to international events to drum up more interest.

He will speak at one seminar on the subject in New York on 10 September and at a separate, Henley-sponsored, conference in Singapore in late October.