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The Parliament of Ukraine has adopted a new language law

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On 3 July, the Supreme Council of Ukraine adopted a law on the principles of state language policy, guaranteeing 'regional and national minorities languages' a role as parallel official languages in public offices and local government in regions where at least 10% of the population have expressed a desire for this in the form of a petition.The document will come into force upon signature by the president, which can be expected before the parliamentary elections in October. The Act was passed very quickly, and in violation of parliamentary procedure, and the actual number of votes in favour was below the required majority; this will most likely be the reason for its eventual referral to the Constitutional Court. The opposition has announced a boycott of parliament, and on 4 July its speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn resigned in protest.

Commentary

- The most important consequence of the enactment of this Act is that the Russian language can legally be used as a parallel official language in most regions of Ukraine. In practice, this may result in the displacement of Ukrainian from public life in much of the country. Of Ukraine's other ethnic groups, the Hungarians in the Trans-Carpathian region, the Romanians in Chernivtsi region and the Tatars in Crimea will benefit from the law; but for the other, less numerous minorities of Ukraine (including Poles), this Act is of no significance. The procedures provided for in the law are complex, and its text contains contradictions, and it may thus be amended even before it comes into force (perhaps during a possible special session of parliament in July or August).

- The unexpected passing of the Act is a success for the Party of Regions, and increases its chances of victory in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The party will be able to present itself as having kept its word, and the new language law can be portrayed as an expression of its concern for the citizens. Given the positive attitude of the majority of society to granting more rights to the Russian language, one can assume that for a substantial part of them, the social problems will fade into the background; this may translate into higher voter turnout and increased support for the Party of Regions. Therefore, the language law will serve as an instrument for mobilising a significant part of Ukrainian society to go and vote for the ruling party.

- The adoption of the law has forced the main opposition parties to concentrate on the struggle for the status of the Ukrainian language and other symbolic issues in the election campaign, in order to keep hold of their key constituencies in the western regions. At the same time, the move makes it harder for the opposition to win the support of voters from the east and south, even those who are unhappy with the current government's policy.

- Nevertheless, the main opposition movements' reaction to the passage of the language bill has been surprisingly weak, especially in the light of the earlier announcement that they would not allow its adoption. This may reduce support for them in nationalist circles, and may increase support for the radical *Svoboda* [Freedom] party, probably allowing it to enter parliament. This division of the opposition electorate is also a success for the Party of Regions.

For more on the Act and the 'language issue' in Ukraine, see *CES 40, 'The language issue in Ukraine: Attempting a new perspective.'*