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Russian citizenship for Donbas residents

Jan Strzelecki, Krzysztof Nieczypor

On 24 April, Russia's President Vladimir Putin signed a decree introducing a simplified procedure for granting citizenship to the residents of the separatist republics in the Donbas (DNR/LNR). In its rationale for the decree, Russia referred to the "protection of the rights and freedoms of man and citizen", as well as its humanitarian goals. The decree obliges the Ministry of Internal Affairs to draw up a procedure for receiving applications for citizenship, which are to be considered within three months of their submission. The decree was signed by virtue of an amendment to the Russian Federation's Law on Citizenship (introduced in December 2018), which gave the President the ability to introduce a simplified procedure for granting citizenship. Russian law does not prohibit the holding of another country's citizenship.

Ukraine has submitted a request to convene an extraordinary meeting of the UN Security Council in connection with the decree, which will be held on 25 April. Putin commented on Kyiv's statement by stating that the decree was associated with humanitarian matters, and that both Hungary and Romania have been issuing passports to Ukrainians while Poland has been issuing its 'Pole's Card' for years.

Commentary

- The signing of the decree is part of Russia's broader plan to strengthen its ties to the occupied part of the Donbas. It also hopes that the move will counteract the rise in Volodymyr Zelenskiy's popularity within the parastates, and pressure him into making concessions. Moscow is aware that signing this decree will fuel political divisions in Ukraine and could weaken the president-elect's position. Russia hopes that the political instability in Ukraine will increase the importance of pro-Russian forces in the Ukrainian parliament after the autumn's parliamentary elections. In addition, Moscow intends to use the rise in tension around Ukraine associated with signing the decree to persuade Western countries to pressurise Kyiv into agreeing to Russia's terms to normalise relations.
- In the past Russia has used the granting of Russian citizenship as an instrument in other conflicts in the post-Soviet region (including Transnistria and Abkhazia); the move helps to maintain control over the separatist regions and prevent the conflicts there from being resolved. The Kremlin also sees the granting of Russian citizenship in territories covered by conflict as justification for its involvement, and as a tool to boost pro-Russian sympathies. In the long term, the presence of a significant number of Russian citizens in

the Donbas will guarantee that Russia retains influence on the situation there, even if the region is reintegrated into Ukraine. If Russia's strategy towards Ukraine fails, Moscow will use the argument that there are Russian citizens in the Donbas who must be defended in order to blackmail Ukraine with the threat of military escalation.

- The signing of the decree does not indicate a change in Russia's strategy towards Ukraine, or any plans to incorporate the Donbas into the Russian Federation. The Russian government, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, recently stated its expectations of Kyiv; firstly, the Donbas should be granted broad autonomy within Ukraine, and constitutional reforms leading to the federalisation of the country should be introduced. To the Ukrainian government, including president-elect Zelenskiy, these requests are unacceptable, and meeting them would cause a serious political crisis in Ukraine.
- Allowing the granting of Russian passports will be a kind of response to the rising social discontent in the Donbas, which has been caused by the difficult economic situation. To some extent, this decision is also intended to counteract the popularity in the breakaway 'republics' of Zelenskiy, who received considerable support in eastern Ukraine during the presidential elections. The inhabitants of the occupied Donbas could view the president-elect, who has not resorted to nationalist rhetoric, and has spoken favourably about the Russian-speaking part of Ukrainian society, as a more attractive alternative to the Moscow-controlled separatists. The signing of the decree should thus be seen as an attempt to convince the DNR & LNR's inhabitants that they can still count on support and assistance from Moscow to bind them more closely to the Russian Federation.
- The signing of the decree does not mean that Russia will choose to automatically confer citizenship on the residents of the Donbas *en masse*, as this would increase the costs associated with social benefits. The first passports will most likely be issued to representatives of the parastates' authorities, and then to those who are young and able to work. This procedure will apply to persons with the right to receive social benefits (pensions) to a lesser extent, as this would place a burden on the Russian budget. The current difficulties Ukraine is facing with issuing pensions for Donbas residents (including long queues at the so-called demarcation line) are an important tool of Kremlin propaganda, which is aimed at persuading the people in the self-proclaimed 'republics' that the authorities in Kyiv have a reluctant or even hostile attitude towards them.