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The ongoing de-Ukrainisation of the Donbas

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On 6 March the so-called People's Council of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) unanimously voted to introduce changes to its constitution which will deprive the Ukrainian language of its status as a state language. As a result, Russian will function as the only official language. The separatist authorities have presented this decision as being part of the ongoing "intensive process of integrating the Donetsk People's Republic with the Russian Federation." The explanatory memorandum also pointed to the lack of everyday use of Ukrainian as the state language, and emphasised that the current activities of the self-proclaimed republic's legislative bodies are *de facto*conducted in Russian. At the same time, amendments to the Education Act were passed which provide for the recognition of the Russian language as the primary medium of teaching in educational institutions.

Commentary

- The ongoing de-Ukrainisation of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic is a continuation of measures intended to bind its inhabitants more closely to the Russian Federation and to deepen divisions within Ukrainian society. Although the Donbas was the most Russified region of Ukraine before its occupation, the regulations just adopted threaten the complete elimination of the Ukrainian language from the public space of the para-state created on this territory. This policy, which has been inspired and coordinated by Moscow, is intended to deepen the gulf between the population living in Ukraine's occupied territories and the rest of the country's population, and thus to hamper the process of reintegrating it if the conflict is resolved. At the same time, the new regulations are intended to show Ukraine's decision-makers that the process of integrating the Donbas with Russia is ongoing, and to put pressure on Kyiv to accept Russia's conditions for making peace.
- An important part of Russia's strategy for putting pressure on Ukraine is the ongoing issuance of Russian passports to residents of eastern Ukraine, with the aim of spreading Russian documents throughout the local population. According to Ukrainian data, 156,000 people in Donbas have now obtained Russian passports, and the Russian Interior Ministry says that over 250,000 documents have been issued. The separatist media has reported that by the end of the year more than 700,000 residents in the areas of eastern Ukraine not controlled by Kyiv are expected to receive Russian passports.
- The changes to the law on education should be assessed as a response to the law on general education adopted by the Ukrainian parliament in December, which regulates the

availability and conditions for obtaining education. On the basis of this law, the role of the Russian language in public schools has been significantly reduced and its status in the legal hierarchy demoted; it has now been placed below the Ukrainian, Crimean Tatar, Gagauz and Karaim languages, as well as the 24 official languages of the European Union. The DPR's recognition of Russian as the primary language of instruction also fits in with the broader school programme being implemented in the occupied areas, which treats the Donbas as an integral part of the Russian state and its culture.