

Ukrainian Lawmakers Halt Vacations for Special Session

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KIEV — Ukraine's parliament will reconvene for an extra session Monday, the chamber said, in a move that could lead to a contentious bill to make Russian an official language in parts of the country being signed into law.

President Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions rushed the bill through parliament this month using a procedural trick, in what opponents saw as an attempt to rally public support in Russian-speaking regions ahead of October parliamentary elections.

But the move backfired, as hundreds of protesters poured onto the streets of Kiev and clashed with riot police.

Parliamentary Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn refused to sign the bill, a step needed before Yanukovich could sign it into law. The chamber then went into recess until September.

At the extra session, announced late Thursday, the Party of Regions will have another opportunity to get Lytvyn to sign the bill.

Or parliament, dominated by Yanukovich's party and its allies, could elect a new speaker.

Yanukovich has not said whether he would sign the bill into law.

While Ukrainian is the only state language, the bill would make Russian an official regional language in predominantly Russian-speaking areas in the industrialized eastern and southern regions, such as Crimea, where Russia's Black Sea fleet is based.

On Friday, opponents of the bill staged small protests in several cities wearing Guy Fawkes masks.

In Ivano-Frankivsk, demonstrators tried to put a sign reading "Office of the traitors of Ukraine's interests" next to the local Party of Regions office, but they were stopped by party officials, Interfax said.

Activists, who say the bill is a ploy to win back voters in areas alienated by the cash-strapped government's economic policies, have threatened to stage further protests if it becomes law.

Knut Vollebaek, head of minorities' rights at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, urged Ukraine last week to seek compromise on the issue rather than pass the bill in its current form.

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