

As Language Bill Passes, Opposition Warns of Split in Ukraine

July 30, 2012



Deputy Oleg Lyashko dousing Deputy Speaker Adam Martynyuk with tea during Monday's special session.

KIEV — Opposition politicians walked out of Ukraine's parliament in protest Monday after warning that a law making Russian the official language in parts of the country would set citizens at each other's throats.

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

The move led to street protests in Kiev and brawls in parliament. The chamber went into recess until September, leaving the bill in limbo, but last week the parliament said it would reconvene for an extra session Monday.

Arseny Yatseniuk, leader of the opposition Front of Change party, described the bill as a "crime against Ukraine and the Ukrainian state" during the special session Monday.

"We regard this as an anti-constitutional maneuver — it does not exist for us as a law," he said.

Ivan Zayats, a deputy of Our Ukraine, another opposition party, said: "This law will set Ukrainians of the left bank against the right, north against south."

Opposition lawmakers then left the special sitting in protest before the parliament — dominated by the Party of the Regions — voted against any changes to the bill, which has passed its second and final reading.

The way is now clear for parliamentary Speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn to send the bill to Yanukovich for his signature. Lytvyn won a vote of confidence from parliament on Monday despite having formally resigned over the language dispute.

Yanukovich has not yet expressed his view on the bill, but his popularity would take a hard knock in his eastern Ukraine power base if he failed to sign it into law.

About 1,000 opposition protesters attempted to rally near the parliament Monday but were barred from getting close to the main building.

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

Opponents of the bill, who regard the Ukrainian language as a touchstone of sovereignty and independence from Russia, say it will mean that knowledge and usage of Ukrainian will die out in those areas.

Passions remain high, however, and the law is likely to be a high-profile issue in the Oct. 28 elections, when Yanukovich's Party of the Regions will have to work hard to maintain its majority after unpopular government policies on pensions, taxation and the cost of home utilities.

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