

Protests Over Russian Language Bill Intensify In Ukraine

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Clashes took place in front of the Ukrainian parliament building on Tuesday between security forces and activists opposing a controversial new language law. If passed, the law would make Russian an official state language alongside Ukrainian in many regions.

The clashes erupted after Parliament gave initial approval to the bill.

[Victor Sharapka, Activist]:

"I want my children to live in the Ukrainian state, and speak the Ukrainian language, because language is the foundation of our statehood, which has been developing for thousands of years."

Close by is a rally held by supporters of the bill. They're pushing for official state status for the Russian language.

[Valentine Markitan, Supporter of the Bill]:

"One cannot force a person, who was born as a Russian citizen, and has been talking in Russian all his life, to in old age, at 70 years old, speak Ukrainian."

Vadim Kolesnichenko, author of the bill, defends the proposed law.

[Vadim Kolesnichenko, Author of the Bill]:

"Ukrainian is preserved as a state language. It's just that in regions where Russian is widespread, native speakers will also be able to use Russian as a state language."

Plans are to introduce the law in 13 regions of Ukraine's total of 27. So in regions with large numbers of Russian-speaking citizens.

The opposition claims the bill is anti-Ukrainian.

The People's Deputy Yuriy Kostenko intends to appeal to the Constitutional Court to overturn the decision.

[Yuriy Kostenko, Member of Parliament]:

"The adoption of any laws that weaken the official state status of the Ukrainian language - is an erosion of the Ukrainian Constitution and Ukrainian statehood."

Under the Constitution, there is only one official language in the country - Ukrainian.

Implementing Russian as a second state language was one of the main campaign promises of current President Viktor Yanukovich.

According to sociological research company Research & Branding, a third of Ukrainians consider Russian as their native language, and almost half of the respondents believed that there should be two official languages.

However, people in the city center are unanimously in favor of Ukrainian as the sole official language.

[Citizen of Ukraine]:

"The adoption of the law on the languages is destroying the state. I believe that in everyday life, when communicating with other people, we can use any language we like - Russian, Ukrainian, Tatar or Jewish. But there must be only one official state language."

[Citizen of Ukraine]:

"Ukraine has one official language and it's Ukrainian. I think the Ukrainian language should to be promoted to encourage people to speak it more widely."

The opposition says it will not allow adoption of the bill on its second reading, and have announced a perpetual all-Ukrainian protest action.

NTD, Kiev, Ukraine