

Ukrainians Protest Russian-Language Bill

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About 1,000 opposition activists — mostly dressed in traditional embroidered shirts — rallied in Kiev on Thursday to protest legislation upgrading the status of the Russian language.

The Ukrainian parliament passed a bill Tuesday that would allow the use of Russian in courts, education and other government institutions in Russian-speaking regions of the country.

Members of Ukraine's pro-Western opposition say such a law would effectively smother the Ukrainian language by removing any incentive for millions of Russian-speaking Ukrainians to learn it. They also say it would bring Ukraine back into the Russian orbit and torpedo its efforts to forge closer ties with the European Union.

The activists gathered outside a government building in the capital. Some of them waved national flags and chanted "East and West together!" and "No to the split of Ukraine!" Riot police in full gear stood by.

Seven opposition lawmakers who announced a hunger strike against the legislation

on Wednesday were among the demonstrators.

Lawmakers loyal to President Viktor Yanukovich, who draws his support from the Russian-speaking east and south, rushed the bill through the parliament, without giving the opposition much chance to oppose it in a debate. Parliament's speaker, whose signature on the bill is required before it is given to the president, resigned in protest.

Imprisoned former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko sent a message of support to the protesters from a prison in the country's east, where she is serving a seven-year term for abuse of office.

"Yanukovich has declared war not only on the opposition and specific democratic values, but on independent Ukraine as it is," she said in a statement posted on her website. "He has challenged the entire nation."

The controversial bill has yet to be signed by the president to become law.

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