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Ukraine Needs Time to Sign Trade Deal With Europe, EU says

By The Moscow Times

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Ukraine's newly elected president, Petro Poroshenko, is not yet ready to set a date for signing a landmark trade deal with the European Union, but there is no indication he is backing away from the accord, EU officials said Wednesday.

The proposed trade agreement with the EU has been at the heart of Ukraine's political crisis over the past six months since former pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych turned his back on the accord at the last minute.

His decision to jilt the EU and seek a $15 billion bailout from Russia triggered protests that led to him being ousted.

Poroshenko, a billionaire chocolate factory owner who was overwhelming elected by Ukrainians last Sunday, has promised to align his country with the EU.

But Ukrainian authorities told the EU this week that "they needed a bit of time to see how they want to proceed [with the EU trade agreement]," an EU official said.

EU officials said Poroshenko felt he needed breathing room to deal with Ukraine's internal problems and did not want to appear forced into signing the agreement prematurely.

But the officials said the issue was about timing and there was no indication Poroshenko was having second thoughts about signing. "We do not get a sense of foot-dragging," one said.

A statement on Ukraine issued by EU leaders on Tuesday did not refer to the agreement or set a target date for signing.

Poroshenko had told the EU it would be helpful if leaders did not put a date in the statement, as it would allow him more breathing space, the official said.

Poroshenko heads a country facing a deep internal rift after an uprising by pro-Russian separatists in the east and after Russia annexed the Crimea region.

EU leaders signed chapters of the agreement with Ukraine dealing with political cooperation in March, lending support to Ukraine soon after Crimea was occupied by Russian forces.

They delayed signing the more substantial parts concerning free trade until Ukraine had elected a new president, although they did grant temporary trade benefits.

No deadline was set for signing the trade agreement although some EU officials had expressed hope it could be signed at an EU summit in Brussels on June 27 when Georgia and Moldova plan to sign similar agreements.

EU officials said the agreement may still be signed in June, but it was up to the Ukrainians to decide.

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