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Ukraine Legislators Ratify Landmark EU Deal

By The Moscow Times

September 16, 2014



Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko thanks parliamentary deputies after the ratification of a landmark association agreement with the European Union during a parliament session in Kiev, September 16.

KIEV, Ukraine — Ukraine's parliament ratified a landmark association agreement with the European Union on Tuesday, firmly pivoting the country toward the West and drawing a line under the issue that last year sparked massive protests and led to the ex-president's ouster.

In stark contrast to the patriotic fanfare of that vote, parliament earlier in the day went behind closed doors to approve laws granting greater autonomy for rebellious, pro-Russian regions in the east, as well as amnesty for many of those involved in the fighting.

The laws are part of a peace deal between Kiev and the Russian-backed separatists, which includes a cease-fire that has been repeatedly violated since it was imposed on Sept. 5. But the Kiev government has struggled to balance an outwardly pro-European stance with its

attempts to end the conflict in the east by giving greater autonomy to the pro-Russian rebels, a move many in Ukraine fear will allow Russia to bolster its influence and further destabilize the region.

After the ratification vote in Kiev, synchronized with the European parliament by video chat, members of parliament leapt to their feet to sing the Ukrainian national anthem.

The agreement will lower trade tariffs between Europe and Ukraine, require Ukrainian goods to meet European regulatory standards, and force the Kiev government to undertake major political and economic reforms. In a speech to legislators, President Petro Poroshenko called the vote a "first but very decisive step" toward bringing Ukraine fully into the European Union.

Poroshenko also said that those who died during protests against the ex-president and during fighting in the east "gave up their lives so that we could take a dignified place among the European family."

"Since World War II, not a single nation has paid such a high price for their right to be European," he said.

In Brussels, EU lawmakers overwhelmingly ratified the agreement.

"The message this sends could not be clearer: The European Parliament supports Ukraine in its European vocation," said Martin Schulz, president of the EU Parliament. "The European Parliament will continue defending a united and sovereign Ukraine," he said.

Of the bills that were passed earlier in the day, one calls for three years of self-rule in parts of the war-torn east and for local elections to be held in November. It grants concessions that were not offered in a presidential peace plan that was put forward in June, such as local oversight of court and prosecutor appointments and local control of police forces.

A separate bill called for amnesty for those involved in the eastern conflict, although the law does not cover those who are suspected or charged with several dozen crimes including murder, sabotage, rape, kidnapping and terrorism. Nor does the law grant amnesty to those who have attempted to kill Ukrainian law enforcement officials and servicemen, meaning that most of the separatists — who have waged war for five months on government forces — could not be amnestied.

The legislators' decision to hold a closed-door session — an anomaly in the Ukrainian parliament — underscores the political challenges of the moves.

Rebel commander Alexander Zakharchenko told RIA Novosti news agency that the separatist leadership would study the measures, an unusually conciliatory statement compared to the rebels' previous claims that they aim for complete independence from Ukraine.

Though much lauded by the Ukrainian leadership, the cease-fire has been riddled with violations from the start. On Tuesday, the city council in Donetsk said three people died and five were wounded in shelling overnight. Colonel Andriy Lysenko, a spokesman for Ukraine's national security council, said three Ukrainian servicemen were killed over the past day. Clashes continue in the area around the airport in Donetsk, the largest city under

rebel control.

A shell hit a municipal bus in downtown Donetsk on Monday, killing at least one person and injuring another. At the scene, Yevgeny Medvedev covered up the body of his mother, Tatyana, with a jacket. He said that she had been at work when the firing started, and got on the municipal bus to get out of the neighborhood.

"She tried to escape from there, but the shell caught up with her anyway, three bus stops later."

In Kiev, many said they were happy that the EU deal had been ratified, even if they were worried about the direction the government was taking the country.

"I participated in the protests, and we've been waiting for this for so long," said Rostislav Sezov. He said he did not oppose greater autonomy for regions in the east: "Let us be smaller but better. Let us be a core that is oriented toward Europe."

The EU association agreement was long sought by Ukrainians who want their country to turn westward and out of Russia's sphere of influence. But that deal was scuttled by ex-President Viktor Yanukovych, sparking months of protest that eventually forced him to leave office and flee to Russia.

During the protests the EU's flag — the same blue and yellow as Ukraine's — was everywhere. That symbol faded to the background as demonstrators, who set up camp on Kiev's Independence Square, fended off riot police night after gripping night with barricades of burning tires and bricks from the sidewalk.

But even after Russia annexed Ukraine's Black Sea peninsula of Crimea in March and a pro-Russian rebellion broke out in east Ukraine in April, the new Kiev government made it clear that it would not back down from the EU deal that set off a revolution.

Russia has been strongly opposed to Ukraine's tilt toward the EU, and it has threatened that the reduction of tariffs on Western goods would force it to limit the influx of Ukrainian goods into Russia in response. In a significant concession to Moscow, Ukraine and the EU agreed last week to delay the full reciprocal implementation of a reduced-tariff regime until at least 2016.

Both Brussels and Kiev have asserted that other parts of the agreement, such as major political and economic reforms in Ukraine, will not be delayed, but those compromise efforts have many Ukrainians worried that its government is granting too many concessions to Moscow.

Alexander Sinegub, an entrepreneur who was walking in downtown Kiev on Tuesday, said that he had "mixed feelings" about the ratification of the EU deal.

"Nothing has been cleaned up. They've put a bunch of more-or-less patriots at the top of the government, but beneath them everybody has stayed the same. Half a year has passed and yet it's somehow sad to look at all of this," he said.

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