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Ukraine Acts to Push Through Anti-Corruption Laws Before Election

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Ukraine's pro-Western government pressed ahead to secure new laws to tackle top-level government corruption on Tuesday, hoping to ease public discontent before an election from which it wants backing for its plan to end a separatist rebellion.

The proposed laws — presented by Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk ahead of an Oct. 26 parliamentary election — will oblige high-level officials in government, the judiciary and law-enforcement to declare their own and their families' assets and financial transactions.

Bribery has been widespread at virtually all levels of Ukrainian government and public life since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. International watchdogs say it worsened in the past four years under ousted President Viktor Yanukovych.

Under the legislation, the declared income of civil servants will be measured against lifestyle and property holdings, and an independent agency will investigate discrepancies.

Details about property holdings and shares held by top state officials must be declared on an electronic register for public access. Officials' bank accounts will be open to monitoring by a state committee for possible money-laundering.

The proposed laws, which passed a first reading in parliament on Tuesday and will have a second and final reading next week, are part of a drive by the pro-Western leadership to raise Ukraine to European standards and distance itself from the culture of its former Soviet master, Russia.

Kiev expects to boost its eligibility to join mainstream Europe despite the conflict in the east and opposition from Moscow, which it accuses of arming pro-Russian rebels that have declared independence.

President Petro Poroshenko is hoping this month's election will produce a strong coalition to support his push for a peace plan dealing with the separatists while keeping Ukraine on a course of European integration.

More than 3,500 people have been killed in the fighting between government forces and the separatists in the industrial east, according to United Nations figures.

A Sept. 5 ceasefire, cornerstone of Poroshenko's strategy, is under pressure. The Kiev military said on Tuesday that rebels continued to try to wrest control of the main airport in the big eastern town of Donetsk from government forces.

A total of 64 Ukrainian armed service personnel have been killed since the ceasefire came into force, military prosecutor Anatoly Matios told a news conference. Altogether, 956 armed service personnel have been killed in the conflict, he said.

Breaking With the Old Culture

The Kiev leadership says corruption must be ended if Ukraine is to break with its post-Soviet culture and be taken seriously as a European partner.

"Passing this packet of anti-corruption laws ... will give Ukraine a chance to set out on the path of a real fight against corruption," Yatsenyuk told parliament.

Oleksander Mirny, a deputy of the nationalist Svoboda party, called corruption "a fatal disease which eats away at the organism of state from the core."

Despite the government's pledges to clean up public life, Poroshenko and Yatsenyuk face public skepticism. Radicals say nothing concrete has yet been done. Other critics see the anti-corruption program as insincere electioneering.

A group of about 20 people outside parliament on Tuesday threw tomatoes at portraits of deputies who had failed to show up for the vote and threatened them with rough justice if the laws did not pass.

The economy is shrinking rapidly due to the slow pace of reform, huge damage to manufacturing and energy industries in the east inflicted by the conflict, and endemic corruption.

The European Union and Western business associations say the culture of graft deters Western investors who have fled in large numbers in the past five years. Documents requiring signature for a proposed investment to proceed can sometimes languish for weeks in a civil servant's "in-tray" without a hefty bribe.

Yatsenyuk said the top levels of government would be targeted under the new anti-corruption legislation: "The 'big fish' have to be caught," he said Monday.

The new laws run in parallel to a separate program aimed at rooting out government officials closely identified with Poroshenko's Moscow-backed predecessor Yanukovych, who was ousted by street protests in February and fled to Russia.

Though corruption and cronyism were features of Ukrainian life since independence, they reached a peak under Yanukovych, whose allies and family members built business empires.

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