

Greek Bakers, Milk Producers Oppose Trade Reform

DEREK GATOPOULOS, Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Greek associations of bakers, pharmacies, booksellers, and milk farmers expressed angry opposition to plans to overhaul trading rules, fearing they will wipe out independent stores and producers — as unions and opposition parties readied new anti-austerity protests.

The government was due to formally submit the draft legislation to parliament late Friday to scrap dozens of commercial regulations it says are overly protective of independent stores and stifle competition.

Left-wing opposition leader Alexis Tsipras said the measures would condemn ordinary Greeks to "modern slavery" and accused the government of "serving specific foreign and domestic financial interests."

"At this hour, a crime is being committed at the expense of the people and our country," he said in a televised address.

The measures demanded by bailout lenders will be voted on late Sunday, and would liberalize retail sectors. They include plans to grant supermarkets permission to set up in-store pharmacies, scrap price limits on books set by Greek publishers, and allow a longer shelf-life for milk.

Milk producers said the measures would flood Greece's market with imports and put local farmers out of business.

"We tell every (government) lawmaker who votes for these measures that we will not leave them alone. We will follow them with banners and loudspeakers and remind them they are not welcome in their constituencies," said Panagiotis Peveretos, leader of the Association of Greek Livestock Farmers.

The proposed measures were hammered out during seven months of negotiations with Greece's bailout lenders and must be voted into law before the country can get more rescue loans.

Conservative Prime Minister Antonis Samaras' coalition government is facing a strong challenge in May elections for local government and the European parliament from parties opposed to Greece's bailout program, which has required painful reforms and austerity measures.

His coalition partner and Deputy Prime Minister Evangelos Venizelos appealed to lawmakers in his Socialist party Friday to back the bill, describing the vote as "an act of patriotism."

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Unions also oppose the market-reform plans, and have called for weekend protests and a general strike April 9, while main opposition party Syriza also planned a rally Sunday and its youth wing backed demonstrations planned to coincide with a meeting of European finance ministers in Athens next Tuesday.

Pharmacies across the country, meanwhile, closed indefinitely in protest this week.

In Athens, long lines formed outside a small number drugstores remaining open on emergency duty, with customers waiting up to two hours to get their medicine.

A representative of pharmacies in greater Athens, Constantine Lourantos, said the strike would continue after the bill was voted into law, adding that members of his association would effectively campaign against the government in the upcoming polls.

"They are trying to implement changes that Greeks don't want ... to bring in chains to replace the neighborhood pharmacy," he said.

"Even if these measures pass ... elections are coming and 11,000 pharmacies will be the death of this government."

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