

Pro-European Union protests mount in Kiev

Peter Schwarz
3 December 2013

Over 100,000 demonstrators protested in Kiev on Sunday to demand the resignation of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. They were protesting Yanukovich's abandoning of an association agreement with the European Union (EU), which was to have been signed at the Eastern Partnership conference in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius.

On Saturday, a Special Forces unit of the police intervened brutally against anti-government protesters. Although Yanukovich sought subsequently to distance himself from the police intervention, this clearly contributed to the vast numbers who gathered on Independence Square in central Kiev, despite a ban on demonstrations on Sunday.

At first the police held back, and the demonstration passed peacefully. But in the evening, there were renewed heavy clashes, with over one hundred injuries. This time the attacks emanated from masked demonstrators who were attempting to storm the President's office.

Around 5,000 anti-government protesters spent the night in the centre of Kiev and put up tents and barricades. Vitali Klitschko, one of the opposition leaders, urged them not to give up control of the city centre and to block important administrative buildings. "We have to mobilise everyone in the country and we can't afford to lose the initiative," he said.

Along with former world boxing champion Klitschko's Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform (whose acronym UDAR also means strike), the Fatherland Party of imprisoned opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko and the All-Ukrainian Association "Svoboda" have organised the protests. The three parties have formed an alliance called Action Group of the National Resistance.

While UDAR and Fatherland have close ties to conservative European parties, particularly the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Svoboda represents openly far-right and anti-Semitic positions. They hail Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera as a national hero and are members of the European Alliance of National Movements, which is led by the French National Front

politician Bruno Gollnisch and includes Hungary's Jobbik Party and the British National Party.

The demonstrations have also been supported by leading European and American politicians, the EU and NATO.

The foreign ministers of Poland and Sweden, Radoslaw Sikorski and Carl Bildt, expressed their solidarity with the demonstrators in a joint statement. Former Polish Prime Minister and leader of the national conservative PIS Jaroslav Kaczynski personally took part in the demonstration in Kiev.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned the Ukrainian President on Monday against the use of violence against peaceful protesters. She called upon him to do everything to secure freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest. Merkel's spokesman Stefan Seibert added that the demonstrators were sending a clear message. "It is to be hoped that President Yanukovich also comprehends this message," he said.

Jen Psaki, spokeswoman for the US state department, called on the Ukrainian leadership to observe the right of freedom of expression. "Violence and intimidation should not have any place in today's Ukraine," she declared, in the direction of the government. NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen also expressed similar views.

Comparing this with the open or silent support from the same politicians for the frequent and brutal suppression of demonstrators in Greece, Spain or Portugal against the austerity dictates of the EU, their bias is obvious.

What is currently taking place in the Ukraine is not a struggle for the rule of law and democracy, as the European and American media are attempting to claim, but a struggle between different factions of Ukrainian oligarchs, and a conflict for power between Europe, and above all Germany, and Russia for control over Ukraine.

The US and EU heavily backed the so-called Orange revolution in 2004 led by Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, which forced a re-run of elections after Yanukovich was elected President.

However, the promises of freedom and democracy were

quickly disappointed. While Yushchenko won the Presidential election and named Tymoshenko Prime Minister, the power of the oligarchs remained untouched. The living standards of broad sections of the population continued to decline and Yushchenko and Tymoshenko rapidly split. In 2006 Yanukovich returned to the post of Prime Minister and was re-elected President in 2010.

Although Yanukovich originally acted as Moscow's ally, it quickly emerged that the oligarchs from Donetsk in eastern Ukraine, whose interests Yanukovich represents, also saw advantages from closer cooperation with the EU.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the EU has been strenuously trying to draw Ukraine out of Russia's sphere of influence and into its own. In 1994, the EU concluded a cooperation and partnership agreement with Ukraine. In 1996, the then-Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma declared that integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures was a strategic goal for his country.

Under Kuchma's successor Yushchenko, discussions began on the association and free trade agreement. These negotiations were concluded under the leadership of Yanukovich, until he made a last-minute retreat.

Russian pressure played a role in this. Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened economic sanctions and an end to cooperation with Ukrainian arms manufacturers if the agreement was signed. The German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*'s explanation was that Yanukovich retreated because the pro-EU protesters could be controlled, but a further economic decline resulting in thousands more unemployed would have sealed his political fate in the lead up to elections in 2015.

It was not just Russian pressure that was decisive, however. The EU Association Agreement would have led to social disaster. The agreement aims to transform Ukraine into a low-wage platform for European companies, and demands far-reaching "reforms" that would reduce for years to come the already low standard of living of the working class.

A study by the German social democratic Friedrich Ebert Foundation states: "Reforms take time, courage and perseverance." It praises the Ukrainian government which in 2010 agreed "an ambitious reform program adopted under pressure from the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), aimed at fundamentally changing taxation and pension legislation, promoting privatization and deregulating state activity".

In order to meet EU technical standards and sell

Ukrainian goods on the European market, Ukrainian companies would also have to make huge investments. According to calculations by Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, between 100 to 160 billion euros would be needed for the technical transition over a period of ten years. The EU, however, has promised just one billion in funds over a period of seven years.

During this transitional period, Ukrainian companies would face cutthroat competition from European companies and would struggle to survive. The result would be a massive loss of production capacity, jobs and tax revenues that would be further exacerbated by the removal of the country's current tariff privileges with Russia.

As long ago as last February, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso made clear that an association between Ukraine and the EU ruled out any possible membership in a tariff union with Russia. The country had to choose one or the other.

In addition to economic aims, the EU is clearly pursuing geopolitical objectives with the Association Agreement. With its vast and fertile countryside, its population of 46 million, and its raw materials and strategic location between Europe and the Caucasus, as well as Russia and the Black Sea, Ukraine has repeatedly been a target for German imperialism.

The above-cited study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation openly states: "For European investors an underdeveloped market with 45.7 million potential consumers and highly skilled workforce is opening up with doors to other states in the region." In order to assure the success of the partnership with Ukraine, the FES study adds, "the European Union must measure up as a global player".

The co-editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Günther Nonnenmacher, also strikes martial tones. The Ukrainian people have to decide where they want to belong: "in the sphere of influence of a neo-imperial Russia or the community of free nations of Europe."



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact