

Ukrainian government issues ultimatum to end pro-EU protests

Stefan Steinberg
10 December 2013

After a large demonstration on Sunday demanding the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, the situation remained extremely tense on Monday in Kiev. While a few thousand demonstrators stayed in the city centre to block government buildings, police and elite security forces surrounded them and threatened to remove them.

The government has set an ultimatum to demonstrators expiring at midnight, at which time all occupied buildings are supposed to be vacated.

Russia's Itar-Tass agency reported that around 6,000 security personnel had moved into Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), where demonstrators had gathered and cordoned off the square with barricades.

At one point, police entered the offices of the Fatherland Party of jailed Ukrainian opposition leader Yuliya Tymoshenko. Party spokesmen claimed police forced their way into the rooms, destroying doors and confiscating computers. The police denied that this had taken place.

In the background, different groups of oligarchs as well as representatives of international governments are maneuvering to utilize the impasse to their own advantage.

The EU's top diplomat, Catherine Ashton, has announced that she will arrive in Kiev on Tuesday to act as a mediator between the government and the opposition. The EU has heavily supported the demonstrations, which erupted after Yanukovich's November 21 decision to abandon an association agreement with the EU.

Yanukovich himself has agreed to talk to the opposition. He released a statement on Monday saying he supported the idea of an "all-nation round table" to include the country's three former presidents—Leonid

Kravchuk, Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko—to find a solution to the political crisis.

Yushchenko, together with Tymoshenko, was the leader of the Orange Revolution that ousted Yanukovich in 2004. Kuchma is closely tied to a pro-EU oligarch faction. His son-in-law, the billionaire Victor Pinchuk, has signed the letter in support of the demonstrations.

While the leader of the UDAR opposition party, professional boxer Vitali Klitschko, has expressed his support for talks with the president, the opposition as a whole has insisted on three conditions: the resignation of the government of Mykola Asarov; the liberation of all arrested demonstrators; and the punishment of policemen who injured demonstrators in a violent crackdown a week ago.

It is also not clear, however, if the far-right nationalist Svoboda (Freedom) party will accept any deal at all. The party has transported several hundred men with military experience to Kiev, who are ready to fight in a confrontation with the police. On Sunday they pulled down a statue of Lenin. Svoboda leader Oleg Tyagnibok told a crowd of supporters that the recent events in Kiev represented a "national revolution".

The conservative German paper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), which has its own reporters in Kiev, cited plans of "opposition forces" should the Asarov government resign.

They intend to install a "technocratic government" that would immediately sign the association agreement with the EU. A possible leader of such a government is the MP and billionaire oligarch Petro Poroshenko, whose holdings include a television station that has continuously reported from the demonstrations.

The opposition forces quoted by the FAZ also expressed their hope that such a government would

restart negotiations with the IMF on a \$15 billion loan that Ukraine needs to avoid bankruptcy in the coming months. The IMF has tied such a loan to the abolition of subsidies for gas for private households, which would increase the price of heating by at least 40 percent.

Opposition forces speaking to the *FAZ* said it would be easier for a technocratic government led by an entrepreneur and supported by both the forces of the current regime and the opposition to impose these conditions on the Ukrainian population.

Such considerations, while it is far from sure that they will materialize, indicate the shabby deals and maneuvers taking place behind a right-wing movement has tried to wrap itself in the mantle of “democracy” and the “rule of law”.

A major role is being played behind the scenes by the German government and the Christian Democratic Union of Chancellor Angela Merkel, which has built up Klitschko’s UDAR party and is also supporting Timoshenko’s Fatherland Party.

While the demonstrators were blocking government buildings and militant Svoboda activists destroyed a Lenin statue in the centre of Kiev, German foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle warned the Ukrainian government not “to undermine the peaceful protests with pressure, threats or violence”.



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