

Ukraine round-table talks fail as power struggle intensifies

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The power struggle in the Ukraine intensifies after round-table talks failed on Friday. In a meeting between President Viktor Yanukovich's government and the right-wing, pro-European opposition—led by Arseniy Yatsenyuk of oligarch Julia Tymoshenko's Homeland Party, boxing champion Vitali Klitschko, and the fascist Oleh Tyahnybok—no agreement was reached.

The talks which also included student leaders, religious figures and union representatives were the first direct encounter between the opposition and the government since protests erupted after Yanukovich declined to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union late last month.

Under heavy pressure from both the United States and the EU this week, the Yanukovich government had indicated it might reconsider its decision. On Thursday, after talks with European commissioner for enlargement Stefan Fuele, Deputy Prime Minister Serhiy Arbuzov said in Brussels that Kiev “will soon sign this association agreement with the European Union, taking into account the national strategic interests”.

At the same time, Yanukovich sought to keep relations with Russia intact. He sent a parallel delegation to Russia and is scheduled to visit Moscow next week to discuss a trade agreement with Russia.

For Sunday, Yanukovich's Party of Regions has for the first time called for a pro-government demonstration, claiming that it will bring 200,000 protesters to the capital.

In Friday's round-table talks, Yanukovich warned that “any instability negatively influences not only the image of the country but the life of people, the stability of the economy which is very unsteady”. In an attempt to appease the protesters, he offered an amnesty for

arrested demonstrators “in order to give guarantees that the process of confrontation will stop”.

The opposition however insisted that this was not enough. They demanded the dismissal of Prime Minister Mykola Azarov and of Interior Minister Vitaly Zakharchenko, whom protesters blame for excessive police violence.

Speaking to the round-table, Yatsenuk said: “Those who gave the criminal orders and those who carried them out must bear responsibility so that the whole country can see that no-one can lay a hand on peaceful people ... This government personally carries responsibility for the political and economic crisis”.

After the meeting, Klitschko complained: “This round-table was simply a declaration and not a single step was made to meet the opposition. I have the impression that the authorities today did not listen to a single one of the demands of the opposition”.

After the failed effort to find a way out of the three-week long stalemate a deepening confrontation between the country's rival oligarchic cliques and their various international backers in Europe, the US and Russia is building up.

The opposition has called for renewed mass protests on Sunday. New protesters—mainly from the Western part of the Ukraine, where support for an agreement with the EU is strongest—reportedly have arrived in Kiev. Some rebuilt barricades around Independence Square, which had been torn down by police on Wednesday. On the previous two Sundays, rallies have drawn tens if not hundreds of thousands of protesters to the epicenter of the protests.

The opposition leaders feel strengthened by the Western support and the fact that some influential oligarchs have sided with the protests. Last week Victor Pinchuk, Ukraine's second richest man and son-in-law

of former president Leonid Kutchma, came out in support of the protests. Most of the oligarchs, especially those from the East have backed Yanukovich and have ties to Russia, but many regard a closer cooperation with the EU as a way to defend their wealth.

In recent days, both the EU and Washington increased their pressure on Yanukovich. On Thursday, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel called his Ukrainian counterpart Pavlo Lebedyev and warned him of the “potential damage of any involvement by the military in breaking up the demonstrations”.

The day before, US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki had threatened that all policy options, including sanctions, “are on the table”.

The European Union, which has been amongst the most outspoken supporters of the protests from the start, sharpened its tone against Russia. On Thursday, the European Parliament issued a resolution reiterating “its firm condemnation of the unacceptable political and economic pressure, coupled with threats of trade sanctions, being exerted by Russia on Ukraine”. It calls on the European Commission “to consider possible counter-measures which the EU can evoke when Russia breaks World Trade Organization (WTO) trade rules for short-sighted political ends”.

For US and European imperialism, the pro-EU protests on Independence Square—regardless of the illusions some of the protesters might have—serve as a means to fight out a geopolitical struggle over Ukraine and establish closer connections to the country’s oligarchs.

With the Association Agreement, the EU seeks not to bring democracy to the Ukraine but to curb Russian influence in this strategically important country and turn the Ukraine into a low-wage platform for Western companies.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said on Friday that the appearance of EU politicians at protests was a “crude interference” in Ukraine’s affairs. Amongst others, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle had prominently visited Independence Square in the past days.

Medvedev also warned of the risk of a “tectonic split,” as regional tensions between the western and eastern halves of Ukraine are also escalating due to the

political crisis. A report in the *New York Times* titled ‘In Ukraine’s East, a Message for Protesters: Stop’ highlights these conflicts.

The *Times* quotes one Sergey Yermolenko, a 35 year old programmer who earlier worked for the state-owned railroads. “This is the way it works in Ukraine: The East makes the money, and the West eats it ... Our industry is heavy, it’s the railroads, the factories. We need Russia more than Europe”.

Yermolenko said he “fully supported the president” for clearing Independence Square on Wednesday. He called the demolition of a statue of Lenin by a group of fascist protesters of Tyahnybok’s Swoboda party “crude hooliganism”.

While most workers in the East are either ignoring or openly hostile to the pro-European protests, the *Times* writes that the opposition to protests “has not necessarily fomented new support for Mr. Yanukovich, who has seen his numbers slipping as the country teeters on the edge of bankruptcy. Many viewed the clashes in Kiev as jostling between Mr. Yanukovich’s clan of politicians and ambitious opposition members trying to vault into power by co-opting student movements”.



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