

Tensions rise in Ukraine amid dueling pro- and anti-EU rallies

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16 December 2013

Dueling demonstrations took place in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev on Sunday, between right-wing, Western-backed opposition forces calling for Ukraine to join the European Union (EU) and supporters of Ukraine's Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovich.

Approximately 100,000 protesters (30,000 according to police) marched in the pro-EU protest on Independence Square to listen to opposition politicians and visiting Western officials, while tens of thousands of protesters heard speeches by ruling party lawmakers. The two protests were separated by double lines of heavily armed riot police and armored vehicles.

US senators John McCain (Republican of Arizona) and Chris Murphy (Democrat of Connecticut) addressed the opposition rally, together with the chairman of the European Parliament Foreign Policy Committee, Elmar Brok, a member of Germany's ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

"We're here to support your just cause: the sovereign right of Ukrainians to determine your own destiny," McCain told the protesters. "The destiny you seek lies in Europe. Ukraine will make Europe better, and Europe will make Ukraine better."

Brok declared, "Our message to you is very simple: doors to the association with Europe remain open for Ukraine."

Afterwards, McCain dined with leaders of Ukraine's opposition—Arseniy Yatsenyuk of the Fatherland Party, professional boxer Vitali Klitschko, and Oleg Tyagnibok, a neo-Nazi leader of the far-right nationalist Svoboda (Freedom) party. Tyagnibok is notorious for his anti-Semitic statements.

For its demonstration, the Ukrainian regime sent officials and bused in supporters from the east of the country, where support for close ties with Russia and for Yanukovich is strongest. "We are here to support the president and order," commented Maria Nikolayeva at the

pro-regime march. "Yanukovich is our best prospect at the moment."

"We want to be friends with Russia. We don't want to be slaves under Poland and Germany. If Yanukovich will push us to the EU, we will support another person," said construction worker Krylo Smyrnov, who also attended the pro-regime rally.

Ukraine faces intense pressure from Western officials and banks amid a deepening financial crisis. The country has \$17 billion in loans that must be repaid to global financial markets. Last week, Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov indicated that Ukraine wanted 20 billion euros (\$27.5 billion) in EU aid in exchange for signing an agreement with the EU.

EU officials responded by balking at such a deal and pressing for deeper social cuts in the already impoverished country. Yesterday, EU Commissioner for Enlargement Stefan Fule announced that the European Union was cutting off talks with Ukraine on an agreement until Ukraine gave clearer commitments to EU policy. EU officials indicated they were demanding that Ukraine push through "reforms"—i.e., devastating austerity measures such as energy price increases, wage freezes and budget cuts—as a precondition for continuing talks.

"I don't think Yanukovich will sign the accords. It's blackmail actually. He's saying he will sign only if he gets a lot of money," a senior EU diplomat complained to the *Guardian*. "He's trying to avoid reforms, but the EU agreements are all about reforms."

Yanukovich is expected to travel to Moscow for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday. Opposition spokesmen are warning that while in Moscow, Yanukovich might sign an agreement to join a Russian-led customs union, preempting moves to join the EU.

There are mounting signs, however, that the oligarchs supporting the corrupt Yanukovich regime are shifting and considering closer ties to the EU, calculating that it

might be the most reliable defender of their wealth. Ukraine's wealthiest man, Rinat Akhmetov, a billionaire who has been a close ally of Yanukovich, issued a statement supporting opposition protests on Friday.

Yanukovich is himself trying to signal that he is open to an accommodation with some of the protesters' demands. On Saturday, he pledged to sack Kiev City Manager Oleksandr Popov and Deputy Security Chief Volodymyr Sivkovych because of the bloody police crackdown on protests held November 30.

The situation in Ukraine is a product of the collapse of the USSR and the counterrevolutionary role over many decades of the Soviet bureaucracy. This culminated in the Stalinist bureaucracy's pillaging of the country so that the oligarchs could obtain their ill-gotten billions, leaving it at the mercy of the EU, the global financial markets and an utterly reactionary political establishment.

Through the massacre of the Left Opposition to the Soviet bureaucracy and suppression of the Trotskyist movement, Stalinism undermined the development of a political movement defending the interests of the working class and left behind a legacy of political confusion and disorientation. Thus, amid rising economic crisis and social anger in the working class, what initially predominates are the maneuvers with imperialism of rival cliques of oligarchs and the mobilization of more right-wing sections of the population in pro-capitalist protests.

The reactionary character of this process finds finished expression in the appearance of McCain—a doddering reactionary who speaks for the most aggressive sections of the American military-intelligence apparatus—with neo-Nazis like Tyagnibok.

Absent a movement of the working class against austerity and all factions of the oligarchy, what predominates are explosive regional tensions inside Ukraine and escalating international rivalries, particularly between Russia and German and US imperialism.

Support for the EU is stronger in western Ukraine, while support for ties with Russia predominates in the eastern part of the country. This division is based on significant geographical differences within the country that threaten to tear it apart.

The *Moscow Times* noted: "Western Ukrainians look to Poland, Austria and Germany. People consider themselves European to the core. City halls in Western Ukraine now fly EU flags. In schools, children study German and Polish. This new post-Soviet generation speaks Russian poorly, if at all.

"Travel 1,200 kilometers to the east, and Ukrainians

look to Russia. They produce goods that are exported to Russia. They speak Russian. The Soviet generation often has a hard time speaking Ukrainian, the national language. For three years as president, Viktor Yanukovich has tried to balance these two sides."

Chinese and Russian officials have issued sharp criticisms of the EU-US intervention in support of the pro-EU protests. Yuri Ushakov, a senior foreign policy advisor to Russian President Vladimir Putin, accused the EU and the United States of interfering in Ukrainian affairs.

"The West is actively playing at the Ukrainian field. There is no doubt about it," Ushakov said. "Who is in Kiev on a daily basis, who meets the leadership and the opposition, who lays down demands and sets various conditions? It's not Russia."

The official Xinhua news service of China—itsself entangled in rising tensions with the US over Washington's "pivot to Asia," aimed at diplomatically, economically and militarily isolating China in the Asia-Pacific—issued an editorial criticizing Western policy in Ukraine.

"The West must keep its hands off the domestic affairs of a sovereign nation. Showing support for anti-government protesters is a serious blow to Ukrainian democracy, not to mention that it could complicate regional affairs," Xinhua wrote.

Accusing the US and Europe of pushing Ukraine towards the EU "in a direct challenge to Moscow," it added: "Western meddling has aborted independent dialogue between the government and opposition, planting the seeds of future social and political division in the nation."



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