

Ukraine opposition leader meets with president to defuse protests

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The leader of the opposition Ukrainian Democratic Alliance, boxer Vitali Klitschko, met with President Viktor Yanukovich in the latter's private mansion on Sunday to discuss how to deescalate new protests calling for the resignation of Yanukovich and the government.

On Sunday, part of an estimated 100,000 crowd of demonstrators in central Kiev's Independence Square clashed violently with police. Skirmishes continued into early Monday morning, with police repeatedly using water cannon to hose down protesters in freezing weather conditions.

At one point in the fracas, Klitschko himself was sprayed by a fire extinguisher held by a masked person inside the ranks of the demonstrators.

Commenting on the clashes Sunday, the *Financial Times* wrote: "The violence was also driven by a growing disillusionment among protesters with opposition leaders. Many view them as having been too passive during the protests. There is a danger that if the dissatisfaction gathers force, the leaders could lose control of the protests."

In a press statement, Klitschko warned of the danger of "civil war" in the Ukraine before setting off for his meeting in the president's luxurious palace.

Klitschko met with Yanukovich alone for the meeting, and the details of what they discussed have not been revealed. However, Klitschko told online television channel Hromadske TV that Yanukovich was "very concerned" by the latest events. On Twitter, Klitschko also said that the president had agreed to set up a committee to investigate the political crisis.

Yanukovich, who leads the ruling Party of the Regions, confirmed Monday that a special commission would be set up involving both government officials and opposition leaders. The so-called "working group"

would be headed by the despised secretary of Ukraine's National Security Council, Andriy Klyuyev.

The meeting between Yanukovich and the opposition comes after escalating mass protests, which have occurred regularly since last November. Centred in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev, they have received heavy backing from the United States and the European Union (EU).

The German ruling Christian Democratic Union is one of the main sponsors of Klitschko's UDA. During the demonstrations in December, leading US and German politicians mixed with the crowds and demonstratively supported the protesters.

In response to the demonstrations, the Ukrainian government rushed through legislation last Thursday criminalizing virtually all protests in the capital. Participants in anti-government demonstrations face up to 15 years in prison, if they are found guilty of "mass violation" of public order. The law also aims to curtail the activities of NGOs who are helping to organise the protests.

The legislation also bans the collection of information, such as corruption dossiers on judges, and permits the government to block access to the Internet. The new laws also make it easier to strip opposition MPs of their immunity.

The US State Department promptly responded to the ban on protests, issuing a statement condemning the legislation. It is calling for sanctions to be imposed, including travel bans for leading Ukrainian politicians and the freezing of Ukrainian assets abroad. Following the protests last Sunday, the White House renewed its threat to impose sanctions.

The EU and Berlin have also criticised the new legislation and the response of police forces on Sunday but refrained from demanding sanctions. On Sunday,

the EU ambassador in Kiev, Jan Tombinski, issued an appeal to demonstrators on his Facebook page calling upon them to refrain from attacking the police.

EU foreign ministers and the EU's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton met to discuss the situation in the Ukraine on Monday.

In a statement last Friday, German government spokesmen declared that the Ukrainian laws banning pro-EU protests would have "consequences" for its EU relations. They refused to give any details when asked by journalists, however.

Together with the White House and the EU bureaucracy in Brussels, the German government has played a key role in fuelling protests against the Yanukovych government. All of these forces are intent on establishing a pro-Western regime in Ukraine and undermining the links between the oligarchs around Yanukovych and the Putin government in Russia.

The passage of Ukraine into the orbit of the European Union is seen by the US and the EU as crucial to undermining Putin's plans for a Eurasian Union--a trade bloc of central Asian states that would significantly increase Russia's economic and political influence.

The EU and Germany are trying to pull former Soviet republics, including Ukraine, into their own sphere of influence under the so-called "Eastern Partnership." This EU project explicitly excludes simultaneous membership of the Eurasian Union and the Eastern Partnership. Under the terms of the Eastern Partnership, the EU and International Monetary Fund would have the power to dictate harsh austerity measures, including dramatic increases in energy prices, to Ukraine's already stricken economy. Fearful of the consequences of such a policy for his own government, Yanukovych turned down the EU's overtures and accepted a multi-billion-dollar aid package from Russia in the middle of December.

To further their interests in the Ukraine, the US and EU backed the reactionary opposition alliance of Klitschko's conservative UDA, Arseniy Yatsenyuk's nationalist Fatherland Party, and the far-right Svoboda (Freedom) party led by the notorious anti-Semite, Oleg Tyagnibok.

The decision of Klitschko--who at the start of the protests last November declared he was heading a "revolution"--to meet with Yanukovych reflects fears

in Berlin that more protests could not only bring down the Yanukovych regime, but also tear the country apart. Such a conflict would jeopardise Germany's business interests in the Ukraine and could also lead to mass movements in other eastern European countries bordering on Germany.

Having brought Ukraine to the brink of civil war and fearing that its proxies will lose control of mass protests, Berlin has decided to apply the brakes. Behind the scenes, it has advised its point man in the Ukraine--the boxer Klitschko--to enter talks to defuse the protests.

Germany's economic interests in Russia far exceed its involvement in Ukraine. At the end of last year, senior German politicians intervened to strike a deal with the Russian president to release jailed Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky. In particular, the conservatives' coalition partner in the new German government, the Social-Democratic Party, (SPD) favours closer links with Russia.

One of the first acts of the new coalition government in Berlin was to appoint SPD veteran Gernot Erler as coordinator of German-Russian relations in the foreign ministry. Erler held a similar position in the former SPD-Green coalition (1999-2003), when Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the current foreign minister, was chief of staff to Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD).

Schröder himself is notorious for his statement praising Russian President Putin as a "flawless democrat."



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