

Western powers, opposition step up pressure on Ukrainian regime

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In a further step to force Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych out of office, the right-wing opposition parties—the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reforms (UDAR), Homeland, and the neo-fascist Svoboda—turned down the president's offer of a political amnesty for anti-government demonstrators arrested during the past two months of protests in Kiev's Independence Square.

Yanukovych had reportedly bullied deputies of his Party of the Regions Wednesday evening to vote in favour of the amnesty. The opposition immediately rejected the amnesty on the grounds that the government had made the law conditional on demonstrators quitting the government buildings they have occupied and dismantling the barricades set up in the middle of the city. On Thursday, Yanukovych was promptly declared sick and freed from public duties for an unspecified period.

At the weekend, Vitali Klitschko, the leader of UDAR, which was formed in close collaboration with Germany's conservative Christian Democratic Union, had already dismissed the resignation of the Ukrainian prime minister as a "small step" and called for demonstrations against the government to continue. Following his dismissal of Yanukovych's latest concession, Klitschko gave an interview to the German *Bild* newspaper calling for the EU to impose sanctions on Yanukovych and his government.

Klitschko's call for sanctions against members of the Yanukovych regime was taken up by the president of the Greens in the European Parliament, Rebecca Harms, who gave an interview to German radio on Tuesday. Harms declared that serious preparations for sanctions should be undertaken by "countries such as Germany, Austria or the Netherlands," where companies attached to Yanukovych and his "family" of

associates were active.

Klitschko's call for no let-up in the campaign against Yanukovych was backed by the leader of the Homeland party, former Foreign Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk. Yatsenyuk told reporters that the patron of Homeland, oligarch and former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, had personally appealed to protesters to keep fighting.

"If you stop now, without having obtained a complete victory, then all victims are betrayed," she declared from her prison cell.

European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton also kept up pressure on Yanukovych, travelling to Kiev directly after Tuesday's EU-Russia summit in Brussels. In Kiev, she met with representatives of the opposition, appealed for an end to violence and expressed her concern about reports of demonstrators reported missing.

The European and German campaign against Yanukovych and his main political ally, Russian President Vladimir Putin, was combined with a renewed offensive by the US State Department. Washington has already announced travel sanctions against selected members of the Ukrainian government. Reuters cited US congressional aides Wednesday who said that the Obama administration was preparing additional financial sanctions in the event that state forces move against demonstrators.

In mid-January, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a hearing entitled "Implications of the Crisis in Ukraine." Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland, who travelled to Kiev to personally support demonstrators, and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Tom Melia addressed the meeting, stressing the strategic significance of Ukraine.

Nuland noted that the fate of Ukraine was critical not

only because it lay “at the center of Europe,” but also because it was a “valued” and “important” partner to the United States.

In his report to the meeting, Melia announced that the US had “invested” over \$5 billion in Ukraine since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, with \$815 million of this total going directly to pro-US NGOs. Melia also reported that, since 2009, the Obama administration had donated \$184 million to various programs aimed at implementing political change in Ukraine.

Both Nuland and Melia underlined that the “US stands with the Ukrainian people in solidarity in their struggle for fundamental human rights”. Their comments were supplemented by a report by former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who wrote many years ago of the central importance of Ukraine on the Eurasian chess board.

Against the background of intense US discussions on the future of Ukraine, the announcement this week by US media sources that Russia has tested a new ground-launched cruise missile, in violation of a 1987 treaty banning such missiles, is hardly a coincidence.

In a further development, the US rating agency Standard & Poor’s (S & P) downgraded Ukraine’s creditworthiness this week, thereby raising the interest rates the country has to pay on its debts.

Ukraine will figure high on the agenda at the annual Munich Security Conference, which begins in the southern German city on Friday. Attending the conference are US Secretary of State John Kerry and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel. Both men have publicly criticised the Ukrainian and Russian governments in the past few weeks.

The intense campaign of political pressure from Europe and the US has led key backers of the Yanukovych regime, in particular the country’s richest man, Rimat Akhmetov, to consider changing sides. Akhmetov made his fortune plundering state-owned property in the 1990s during the first regime led by the current president.

The *Guardian* newspaper quotes sources declaring that while Akhmetov may take a “short-term hit,” a deal with the EU was preferable for his long-term “bottom line”. The paper quotes a foreign diplomat who declares, “The oligarchs may not care so much about ‘European values’ but they see ‘European

value’.”

Exposing the essentially reactionary nature of the Kiev protests, Vadim Karasiov, an adviser to Former President Viktor Yushchenko and director of a Kiev think tank, said: “The protests are financed by oligarchs. Today they don’t want Putin or the customs union and they are scared of the Family... If Putin and the customs union win, then power is in the hands of the Family (i.e., Yanukovych).”

The 2004 Orange Revolution, which was primarily sponsored by the US State Department, led to the replacement of the first Yanukovych government by the oligarch regime of Tymoshenko and Yuschenko.

The duo rapidly plunged the country into chaos when they commenced the further enrichment of Tymoshenko and her affiliated oligarchs. Now at the behest of western powers the regime of Yanukovych and his cronies is being pressured out of office to make way for a new regime of oligarchs more aligned with Western strategic interests.



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