EU and Washington step up pressure on Ukraine

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The European Union and the US used last weekend's Munich Security Conference to massively step up pressure on Ukraine. They are seeking to install a technocratic government pledged to implement harsh economic reforms drafted by the International Monetary Fund, change the constitution, curtail the power of the president and bring the opposition into power.

To achieve their aims they are planning substantial short-term financial assistance for Ukraine, as EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton reported. Ashton explained these plans to the *Wall Street Journal*, which wrote of "the West's most significant move to date to reopen the geopolitical struggle for Kiev since Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych turned his back on an EU economic pact and, instead, signed a deal with Russia for $15 billion in aid."

In contrast to most other media outlets, the mouthpiece of Wall Street refrained from euphemistic phrases about freedom and democracy and openly admitted the real aim of the Western powers in Ukraine: a "geopolitical contest for influence" and a struggle "to blunt Moscow's ability to control Ukraine economically and politically."

All of the main players in the conflict on Ukraine had gathered in Munich: US State Secretary John Kerry and Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and many other German and European ministers, and senior EU representatives. Participating from Ukraine were Foreign Minister Leonid Kozhara, opposition leaders Vitaly Klitschko and Arseny Yatsenyuk and the oligarch Petro Poroshenko, who is supporting the opposition and has been suggested as a future head of government.

Klitschko was hailed by the media and participants as the star of the security conference. He spoke in a panel discussion attended by the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kozhara and former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and took part in numerous background briefings, including meetings with Kerry and Steinmeier.

They apparently encouraged Klitschko to step up the pressure on the Ukrainian government. On Sunday, he returned to Kiev and called upon a crowd of 10,000 demonstrators to set up vigilante groups. "Set up vigilantes in every yard, every district, every home," he said.

Klitschko's party UDAR (Strike) is supported and funded by the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation. UDAR has organized anti-government protests together with two other parties, the right wing Homeland and neo-fascist Svoboda (Freedom) parties. They took to the streets following the decision of Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovych in November of last year to cancel on short notice the signing of an Association Agreement with the EU in favor of a loan agreement with Russia.

They are doing so with the open support of the US, German and many other European governments. None of these forces have been deterred in giving their support by the fact that Svoboda defends fascist and anti-Semitic views and glorifies Stepan Bandera, who collaborated with the Nazis in World War II and has the blood of tens of thousands of Jews and communists on his hands.

Contrary to its claims, the opposition does not represent the majority of the Ukrainian people. The opposition has support in the west of the country but is vehemently opposed in the east, home to many Russians and the center of Ukraine's heavy industry. The types of economic reforms demanded by the EU

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and supported by the opposition would have similar devastating effects for the vast majority of the Ukrainian people as the austerity programs of the troika in Greece.

Under these circumstances, the protests have radicalized. Svoboda supporters and other fascist organizations have occupied government buildings and carried out battles with security forces, which on several occasions responded with brutality against demonstrators. In an effort to bring the country under their influence and weaken Russia, the Western powers have driven the country to the brink of civil war.

Now they are having problems restraining the forces they have unleashed. In the east of the country, a "Ukrainian Front" has been founded ready to use force against the pro-European forces. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: "What looked like the development of a popular uprising two months ago is increasingly becoming a guerrilla war."

This has not prevented the EU and the US from continuing to pour oil on the fire. They regard the Ukraine, with its 46 million inhabitants, transport routes for gas and oil, raw materials and large geographical expanse as of great economic and strategic importance. As the longtime editor of *Die Zeit*, Theo Sommer, wrote last autumn, the struggle is about "a new and great geopolitical game" centered on the question: "Where should the EU's eastern boundary lie, and where the western boundary of the Russian sphere of influence?"

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov bitterly complained in Munich about interference from the US and the EU. He accused them of "inciting violent protests" that had nothing to do with democracy. But Lavrov is reluctant to enter into a major conflict, not least due to the winter Olympic Games, which begin on Friday in Sochi, Russia.

As a representative of an authoritarian government that represents the interests of oligarchs closely linked to Western financial markets, Lavrov—like the Ukrainian government—is organically incapable of appealing to the wider masses and offering them a perspective.

In the presence of Lavrov a proposal was discussed in Munich whereby the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe would mediate in Ukraine. Russia is a member of the OSCE, which is currently chaired by Switzerland. The result of any such mediation would be entirely in line with the plans of Steinmeier and Kerry.

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