

US, European Union threaten sanctions against Ukraine

Bill Van Auken
20 February 2014

In the wake of Tuesday's bloody clashes in Kiev's Independence Square, both the European Union and Washington have threatened to impose targeted sanctions against Ukrainian officials as part of the escalating Western campaign for regime change in the former Soviet republic.

The threats from the West came amid warnings that the violence unfolding in Kiev and a number of other Ukrainian cities is evolving into a "coup" or even a "civil war."

President Barack Obama, in a public statement delivered during a state visit to Mexico, threatened that "there will be consequences if people step over the line." He hastened to make clear that Washington is referring not to the right-wing demonstrators who have attacked security forces with gunfire, firebombs, paving stones and clubs. Rather, he said, "We hold the Ukrainian government primarily responsible."

The US president went on to state, "There is still the possibility of a peaceful transition."

This is a euphemism for a deal dictated by Washington that results in the ouster of the elected president, Viktor Yanukovich, and the installation of a regime that is closely aligned with the US and NATO and hostile to Russia.

In the course of his brief remarks, Obama used the phrase "peaceful protesters" three times, a description wildly at odds with the violent and deadly attacks carried out in Kiev on Tuesday.

Earlier, White House Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes said that Washington was in consultation with its European allies on the sanctions. He described that Tuesday's "scenes" in Kiev were "completely outrageous and have no place in the 21st century," an odd remark given the scale of violence unleashed by US imperialism in the first 15 years of this century. He reaffirmed that "Ukraine's orientation towards Europe

and the Transatlantic community is an important priority of US foreign policy."

In Europe, heads of state and ministers engaged in similar denunciations and threats. The European Union is set to convene an emergency meeting in Brussels on Thursday to impose asset freezes and travel bans on select Ukrainian officials.

French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel met in Paris Wednesday, stressing that sanctions were part of a broader policy aimed at forcing out the current government. "What is happening in Ukraine is unspeakable, unacceptable, intolerable," Hollande fulminated.

Merkel signaled that sanctions were a foregone conclusion, with the only question being how they would be targeted. "But sanctions alone are not enough," she added. "We have to get the political process going again."

Earlier this week, two principal Ukrainian opposition leaders, Vitaly Klitschko and Arseniy Yatsenyuk, flew to Berlin for meetings with both Merkel and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier to discuss strategy. The talks were an indication of how directly Germany is intervening in Ukraine, a country it twice invaded in the 20th century.

Both Germany and the US have stepped up their intervention in the country after Yanukovich backed out of an association agreement with the EU that tied loans to austerity measures and instead entered into talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on a \$15 billion bailout.

The German, French and Polish foreign ministers are set to go to Kiev for talks with the government and the opposition and then proceed immediately to Brussels for the meeting to consider sanctions.

Tuesday's clashes, initiated by right-wing and neo-fascist opponents of the Yanukovich government after the Ukrainian parliament failed to approve measures that they had demanded, left at least 26 people dead, including at

least 10 policemen. Injured or wounded were another 263 protesters and 342 police officers.

The government claimed that all of the police fatalities were caused by gunfire, although there were some reports that policemen had burned to death when protesters attacked an armored vehicle with Molotov cocktails. A video was posted on YouTube Tuesday showing protesters wearing helmets and flak jackets using rifles and pistols to fire on security forces in Kiev's Independence Square.

Wednesday saw sporadic clashes, but not on the lethal scale of the day before. Fires continued to burn along the perimeter of the opposition encampment in Kiev's Independence Square, where crowds were reduced to just a few thousand, dominated by right-wing elements such as the anti-Semitic Svoboda party and the so-called Right Sector.

Reports from other areas of the country, however, indicated a continuing escalation of the attacks on the government. In the western city of Lviv, near the Polish border, right-wing militants stormed a number of government buildings, including police stations and a barracks of interior ministry troops, which was set on fire. Both officials and reporters said that guns were seized by the crowd.

Oleksander Yakimenko, the head of the SBU, the Ukraine state security service, reported Wednesday that, over the previous 24 hours, 1,500 firearms and 100,000 rounds of ammunition had been seized from police and military facilities. "Violence is being used in a deliberate, targeted way by means of arson attacks, murder, hostage taking and intimidating the population to attain criminal goals," he said.

"All this is being done with the use of firearms. These are not just signs of terrorism; these are specific acts of terrorism. By their actions, radical and extremist groups pose a real threat to the lives of millions of Ukrainians."

In a video statement, President Yanukovich appealed to opposition leaders "to separate yourselves from radical elements." He said that his aides had tried to convince him to "take harsher measures," but that he had urged restraint. He added that the opposition had "crossed the line when they encouraged people to take up arms." He denounced the recent actions as an attempted "coup."

Moscow, which sees the imposition of a pro-NATO government in Kiev as a direct threat to its strategic interests, has echoed this charge. The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement Wednesday describing the events in Kiev as a "brown revolution," a reference to the

Nazis taking power in Germany in 1933. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov blamed the violence in Kiev on Western governments encouraging right-wing extremists "to act outside the law."

Meanwhile, in Poland, Prime Minister Donald Tusk warned that Ukraine was teetering on the brink of civil war and could undergo partition if a settlement is not reached. "What if no compromise is achieved?" he asked in parliament. "We will have anarchy and perhaps division of the state or civil war, the beginning of which we may now be witnessing."

Late last night, a statement on the presidential web site said Yanukovich had agreed to a truce and "the start to negotiations with the aim of ending bloodshed, and stabilizing the situation in the state." No details were provided.

The announcement came after Yanukovich met members of a crisis group, which included the three main opposition leaders—Klitschko, Yatsenyuk and far-right nationalist Oleh Tyahnibok—the parliamentary speaker and top administration officials. Yatsenyuk confirmed that a truce had been declared so that "the storming of the Maidan (Independence Square) which the authorities had planned today will not take place."

In an earlier indication of the crisis of the Ukraine government, it was reported Wednesday that Yanukovich had sacked the head of the country's armed forces. The move came just as the government was threatening to order troops into the streets as part of an "antiterrorist operation" to restore order.

The instability of the Yanukovich government stems essentially from the fact that it, no less than its right-wing rivals, is fundamentally dependent upon and a political instrument of a narrow layer of corrupt oligarchs who enriched themselves off the privatization of state property following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact