

Dozens killed in Ukraine as EU and Washington step up pressure on Yanukovich government

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European Union foreign ministers stepped up pressure on the Ukrainian government Thursday as fresh fighting between protesters and police left dozens dead. Estimates of the death toll ranged from 25 to 100, with most reports placing the number at around 70, making Thursday the bloodiest in several days of clashes involving armed protesters and riot police.

At an emergency meeting in Brussels yesterday, European foreign ministers agreed to impose sanctions on Ukraine, including visa bans, asset freezes and restrictions on the export of anti-riot equipment. The EU decision followed immense pressure from the US for the European powers to take punitive action against the Ukrainian regime. Washington has already imposed travel bans on 20 leading Ukrainian politicians.

Earlier on Thursday, the foreign ministers of Germany, France and Poland traveled to Kiev for talks with the government and opposition aimed at forcing President Yanukovich to stand down.

In a statement prior to the EU foreign ministers meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov denounced any fresh sanctions against Ukraine. "America's sanctions encourage rioters," Lavrov declared, adding that any new EU sanctions amounted to "blackmail." He concluded: "We're worried about Western capitals influencing the situation in the country."

The Obama administration, the German government and the EU authorities bear the main responsibility for the latest escalation of violence in Kiev and other cities throughout Ukraine.

Following clashes between police and protesters on Tuesday that left 26 dead and hundreds injured, President Yanukovich issued a statement late

Wednesday agreeing to a truce and "the start of negotiations with the aim of ending bloodshed and stabilizing the situation in the state."

The readiness of Yanukovich to call a truce was confirmed by the leader of the right-wing Fatherland party, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who said the purpose of the amnesty was to ensure that "the storming of the Maidan (Independence Square) which the authorities had planned today will not take place."

The fascist Right Sector organization, which, together with the ultra-right, anti-Semitic Svoboda party, is playing the leading role in the street battles, issued a statement Wednesday night declaring that it had not signed up to the government truce and there was "nothing to negotiate."

According to media reports, the outbreak of violent confrontations on Thursday began early in the morning when protesters armed with axes, knives, truncheons and corrugated iron shields launched an attack on riot police assembled around Independence Square.

Within an hour, the area surrounding the Ukraina hotel, which had been under the control of riot police, fell to the protesters. Following a series of attacks on government buildings and police stations, including the torching of the city's central trade union offices, far-right elements confiscated large quantities of arms and ammunition. Videos of the fighting on Thursday show protesters armed with rifles firing at police lines.

The widely despised Yanukovich regime responded by mobilising additional units of its Berkut special force to repel the rioters. Yanukovich, who inflamed the ire of the US, Germany and the EU by backing away from a proposed deal with the EU last November and deciding instead to maintain close ties with

Moscow, represents different factions of Ukrainian oligarchs from those oriented to the West, who are backing the opposition.

Rightist and nationalist forces have also gone onto the offensive in a number of cities in the west of the country. On Wednesday, central administration buildings were stormed and occupied by protesters in Khmelnytskyi, Ivano-Frankivsk, Uzhhorod and Ternopil. In Lviv, the largest city in the west, protesters seized the prosecutor's office and ransacked police stations. They then declared the city's political autonomy from the central administration in Kiev. Supporters of the autonomy movement set up barricades at the borders with Poland, preventing traffic crossing into the region.

With tensions flaring up on the Ukraine-Polish border, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk told Polish TV he had instructed hospitals to prepare for Ukrainian refugees.

Tusk said Hungary and Slovakia were making similar preparations, adding, "What is happening today is not war, but the situation could spiral out of control at any moment... We are ready for the worst case scenarios."

The provocations of ultra-right groups and hooligans have met with deafening silence from Western politicians and media, which uniformly ascribe responsibility for the crisis in Ukraine to the Yanukovych regime and Russia.

The White House and the EU bureaucracy in Brussels are quite willing to allow these forces to destabilize the state through street violence while they lead the campaign to force the Yanukovych government out of power. The US and the EU powers are striving to impose a client regime in Ukraine pledged to carry out austerity policies demanded by the International Monetary Fund and take a much more confrontational stance towards Russia.

During a trip to Mexico, US President Obama publicly criticised the role played by the Russian government in Ukraine. "Mr. Putin has a different view on many of those issues [people's basic freedoms] and I don't think that there's any secret on that," Obama said.

"Our approach in the United States is not to see these as some Cold War chessboard in which we're in competition with Russia," he continued. "Our goal is to make sure that the people of Ukraine are able to make

decisions for themselves about their future."

In fact, the Obama administration's aggressive policy in Central Europe is a continuation of that of the Bush administration, which sought to undermine the influence of Russia over former Soviet republics and former Eastern Bloc allies in Europe, as well as former Soviet Republics in Asia. The real content behind Obama's bluster about democratic aspirations was most vividly exposed by the recent comments of Victoria Nuland, the US assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs.

In a leaked telephone conversation with the US ambassador to Ukraine, Nuland, wife of the neo-conservative cold war warrior Robert Kagan, put forward her preferred scenario for a future Ukrainian government, dismissing the opinion of European leaders with the comment, "Fuck the EU."

Nuland had previously underlined the geostrategic importance of Ukraine to the US when she told an international business conference that the US had invested \$5 billion in NGOs and other organizations opposed to the Yanukovych regime.

In Libya and Syria, the Obama administration and its European allies were prepared to utilize the most reactionary political forces to achieve regime-change. Now in Ukraine they are supporting ultra-right groups to overturn the elected government of Yanukovych. In so doing, they are provoking the break-up of the country and its descent into civil war.



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