

Kiev to build new army, impose austerity as civil war threatens Ukraine

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The new, right-wing Ukrainian regime that seized power on February 22 has announced plans to raise a new army amid rising tensions with Russia and in the run-up to a March 16 referendum on Crimean independence.

The Kiev regime's unelected president, Oleksandr Turchynov, called for military mobilization and the formation of a new National Guard. He said, "It's necessary to create the National Guard on the basis of Ukrainian troops, whose purpose will be to protect the country and citizens against all criminals, external and internal aggression. It's necessary to announce partial mobilization into the National Guard and the Armed Forces of Ukraine."

Turchynov said Ukraine has only 6,000 operational troops, compared to 200,000 Russian troops on Ukraine's eastern border.

Kiev would ask the United States and its allies for help in building the new army, Turchynov added. "The parliament's primary task is to ask countries that are guarantors of our security to fulfill their commitments," he said.

The announcement came amid talks in Kiev with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission to impose deep cuts on Ukrainian workers to plug Ukraine's 50 billion hryvnia (\$5.4 billion) budget deficit. The vast wealth of Ukraine's oligarchs, which has been left untouched by the fascist-led putsch, is not to be harmed. Rather, plans call for workers to pay with cuts to pensions and energy subsidies that are critical to keep home heating affordable.

US-backed former central banker Arseniy Yatseniuk will be meeting today with US President Barack Obama at the White House to discuss the situation in Ukraine.

The saber-rattling in Kiev came as the Crimean

Parliament in Simferopol voted 78-3 yesterday to declare Crimea an independent state in the lead-up to the March 16 referendum, which will also decide on whether Crimea will attach itself to Russia. It cited the separation of Kosovo from Serbia, under the auspices of the United States and the EU, as a legal precedent for the move.

The parliament also banned fascist and pro-Nazi parties, such as the Right Sector militia that led the street fighting in the Western-backed February 22 putsch in Kiev, stating that they "pose a threat to Crimea's security."

The Kiev regime said Crimea had until tonight to cancel the referendum, while US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt said Washington would not recognize the result of the referendum.

Many inhabitants of Crimea, a majority-Russian speaking peninsula that hosts a major Russian naval base at Sevastopol, fear the new regime in Kiev. It has proposed to deprive Russian of its status as an official language and includes fascist parties that have called for liquidating Russian speakers (See: "The fascist danger in Ukraine"). Russian forces and self-defense groups have taken over Crimea, isolating forces loyal to Kiev in their bases.

Pro-Kiev and pro-Moscow sources have traded accusations of violence targeting their supporters in majority Russian-speaking areas of Ukraine. The Russian Foreign Ministry released a statement Monday declaring that "lawlessness now rules in eastern regions of Ukraine as a result of the actions of fighters of the so-called 'Right Sector,' with the full connivance" of Ukraine's new regime.

Viktor Yanukovych, the Russian-backed president ousted in the February 22 putsch, spoke from Rostov-on-Don, Russia to denounce the Kiev regime and

accuse it of unleashing civil war. Noting the role of “neo-Nazi” elements, Yanukovych said any elections organized by the Kiev regime would be “illegitimate.”

Though he initially negotiated similar cuts in an abortive deal with the EU, Yanukovych called planned austerity measures “inhumane and directed against the people.” He also said that he expected to soon be returning to Kiev.

Ukraine’s downward spiral towards social devastation and civil war underscores the reactionary character of the US and EU intervention to topple Yanukovych by supporting far-right groups in street battles with Yanukovych’s “Berkut” riot police.

Amid broad popular opposition in Crimea and other regions of the country to imperialist-backed fascist groups, the Kiev regime has been unable to impose its authority. Southern and eastern Ukraine have become the center of an escalating geo-strategic stand-off between Kiev and the Western powers, on the one hand, and Crimea and Moscow on the other.

The Kremlin’s attempts to seek some sort of accommodation with the West and the new regime have been rebuffed, with US Secretary of State John Kerry suddenly scrapping plans to travel to Moscow over the weekend.

European officials met in London yesterday, threatening Russia with sanctions over the crisis in Ukraine. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius told France Inter radio that sanctions against Russia could begin this week if Moscow ignores Western demands on Ukraine. “If they respond positively, [US Secretary of State] John Kerry will go to Moscow and then sanctions will not be immediate. If they do not respond or if they respond negatively, there will be a series of sanctions that could be taken as early as this week,” Fabius said.

After the London meetings, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said that the EU would impose sanctions on Russia starting the day after the referendum, regardless of its outcome. “When it comes to sanctions on Russia, a decision has in fact already been made, especially on the procedure of introducing sanctions,” Tusk said. “The consequence of this will be the start of sanctions on Monday.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel denounced Russia for “stealing” Crimea before an assembly of parliamentarians of her Christian Democratic Union

(CDU), in a speech that participants described as “emotional.”

Calling for “a definite hardness” in dealing with Russia, Merkel said, “The procedure in Crimea is an annexation that one cannot allow Russia to get away with.”

Moves to economically isolate Russia, a \$2 trillion economy, from Western markets will have explosive economic and political consequences, however. Russian exports to Europe account for 15 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP), and while Russia itself only purchases 1 percent of European exports, Europe depends on it for approximately one-third of its supply of natural gas.



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