US-backed regime drops deadline against east Ukraine protesters, but threat of war remains

Mike Head
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The dangers of a civil war and a US-provoked war with Russia still hang over the people of Ukraine, despite the Western-backed regime in Kiev backing away from a 48-hour deadline for a violent crackdown on protesters occupying government offices in eastern Ukraine.

Just after the deadline expired, the pro-US regime's interim prime minister, Arseny Yatsenyuk, attempted to undercut the protests by pledging to push through a constitutional change allowing referenda for regional autonomy in the country.

Two days earlier, Ukraine's interim interior minister, Arsen Avakov, gave protesters in the key eastern cities of Donetsk, Kharkiv and Lugansk 48 hours to quit the buildings. Andrei Senchenko, the deputy head of the presidential administration in Kiev, declared that the regime's security forces would "shoot to kill."

Yesterday, Yatsenyuk only partially backed away from this ultimatum, saying he was "against forceful scenarios," but adding, "everything has a limit."

By threatening a bloodbath, the far-right regime in Kiev revealed the blatant hypocrisy and double standards in the US- and European Union-orchestrated regime-change operation in Ukraine. Just weeks after using neo-fascist forces as shock troops in overthrowing the elected government of President Viktor Yanukovych—claiming Yanukovych had lost his legitimacy by deploying security forces to attack anti-government demonstrators—the unelected, Western-installed regime declared its intent to massacre people opposing the coup.

The fraud of the Western powers' claims to be championing democracy has not been lost on people in eastern Ukraine. Interviewed by Russian Television, Aleksey, a Kharkiv student, commented: "In Crimea, people voted, overwhelmingly, to return to Russia … But the West calls it unconstitutional and undemocratic. In Ukraine itself, the democratically-elected government has been overthrown and policies that nobody really wants are being pushed down our throats. And … this is called democracy!"

The regime's deadline was dropped amid mounting evidence of widespread working class resistance in eastern Ukraine, the country's industrial and mining heartland, fuelled by outrage over the regime's savage austerity measures, dictated by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, as well as deep-seated hostility to the fascist forces embedded in Kiev and opposition to the suppression of the Russian language and access to Russian media across the region, where the vast majority of the population speaks Russian.

When Yatsenyuk and other officials travelled to Donetsk yesterday, they did not meet with the protesters, but instead met with the eastern Ukrainian governors and mayors imposed by the regime, as well as major business figures, notably tycoon Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine's richest man. Those in the talks included the appointed regional governor, a billionaire metals tycoon, Sergey A. Taruta, whose offices remain occupied by the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic.

Echoing the demands of the EU and IMF, Yatsenyuk laid out what he described as a recipe for national unity: "We must tell people that we know it's tough, but we know how in the future to secure jobs, increase salaries, attract investors, distribute more authority, and what to do so people are content with life."

The reality of the "tough" measures required by the IMF in return for a $27 billion loan is already being spelt out by a 120 percent hike in gas and heating prices, the cutting of social benefits, including free medical assistance, and the closure of several hospitals.

The Associated Press (AP) reported that there is also "an already lingering sense of injustice" over the inevitable requirements of the IMF for the closure of many of the region's state-supported heavy industries. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, tens of

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thousands of jobs have already been destroyed in these industries, and wages have been driven down to near-starvation levels.

There is also popular alarm over the Kiev regime's inclusion of several figures from the neo-Nazi Svoboda party and its reliance on the fascist Right Sector militia. Fascist thugs have been integrated into the regime's new National Guard, contingents of which were deployed to eastern Ukraine to carry out the planned crackdown. Protesters in Donetsk carried placards saying, "We are afraid of fascism in Ukraine."

The AP noted that the regime was being denounced as a "fascist junta," adding that "references are often made to the legacy of Nazi collaboration among Ukrainian nationalists in the west during World War II." The AP continued: "The name of the leading Ukrainian nationalist insurgent, Stepan Bandera, who aided Nazis invading the Soviet Union, is used as a curse word by opponents of the government in the capital, Kiev."

According to local media reports, Ukraine's elite Alpha unit refused to obey an order to besiege protester-held buildings in Donetsk. A commander reportedly told officials that his men were a force intended for rescuing hostages and fighting terrorism and would act only in accordance with the law. Similarly, in Kharkiv, a local police chief quit, saying he had been deceived by the Kiev authorities into besieging a building held by protesters and arresting dozens of occupants on the pretext that it was held by dangerous armed bandits.

Despite this evidence of a groundswell of popular resistance, Washington has ratcheted up its drumbeat of threats against Russia, accusing Russian President Vladimir Putin of stage-managing the protests and preparing to annex eastern Ukraine.

Claiming, without any substantiation, that there was "overwhelming evidence" of Moscow's involvement, US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland told a congressional panel on Wednesday that the building seizures in eastern Ukraine were "very carefully orchestrated, well-planned, well-targeted" moves. She warned of consequences if the "aggressive actions" went unchecked.

On Thursday, NATO's supreme commander, General Philip Breedlove, published a set of commercial satellite photos purporting to show an estimated 40,000 Russian troops and long lines of tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery and aircraft massed along Russia's border with Ukraine. On his Twitter feed he wrote: "Russian forces around Ukraine fully equipped/capable to invade. Public denial undermines progress. Images tell story."

However, an official on the Russian military general staff said Thursday that the images were taken in August 2013 and showed no unusual military movements.

While accusing Russia of mobilising its military, US-led NATO forces are continuing a buildup in the region. In the latest move, on Friday the USS Donald Cook, a destroyer equipped with Aegis missiles, entered the Black Sea, the home of a key Russian naval base. Within the next week, it will be joined by the French reconnaissance ship Dupuy de Lome and the destroyer Dupleix.

Far from having "carefully orchestrated" the protests in eastern Ukraine, the Putin government has responded to the upsurge by urging the demonstrators to drop demands for secession, while at the same time moving toward recognising the Kiev junta.

Yesterday, it was confirmed that four-way talks on the crisis between the US, EU, Russia and the Ukrainian regime will be held in Geneva on April 17. Russia's Foreign Ministry said Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov phoned US Secretary of State John Kerry to encourage the Kiev regime "to have a dialogue with representatives of the (Ukrainian) regions to create conditions allowing for comprehensive constitutional reform."

Also yesterday, Putin said Russia would fulfil its obligations to European gas clients and had no plans to halt deliveries to Ukraine—a day after warning that supplies to Europe could be disrupted by Ukraine's failure to pay its $2.2 billion debt for Russian gas.

Even so, the Obama administration continued its bellicose rhetoric, and Assistant Secretary Nuland played down, in advance, any prospect of ending the confrontation. "I have to say that we don't have high expectations for these talks," she stated.

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