

Pro-Western Ukrainian opposition stokes up civil war

By Stefan Steinberg
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Right-wing, pro-Western opposition forces in Ukraine pushed the country one step closer to all-out civil war yesterday, rejecting President Viktor Yanukovich's proposed concessions and demanding that he step down. The opposition aims to install a far-right administration pledged to implement the austerity policies of the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund.

Protesters clashed with riot police again yesterday in Kyiv and occupied a cultural center near the epicenter of the protests, Independence Square, after a pitched battle with security forces. Protesters have reportedly gained complete or partial control of at least six buildings in central Kyiv: Kyiv City Hall, the Trade Unions Building, the October Palace, the Ukraina Hotel, the Agriculture Ministry, and the Ukrainian House.

On Saturday, President Viktor Yanukovich had declared that he was prepared to make a number of concessions, following months of protests and escalating repression and the passage of an anti-democratic anti-protest law. Yanukovich proposed to appoint two leaders of the opposition, Arseniy Yatsenyuk and Vitali Klitschko, to the posts of prime minister and deputy prime minister respectively.

Yatsenyuk is a leader of the *Batkivshchyna* (Homeland) party, led by the imprisoned oligarch Julia Tymoshenko. A former head of the National Bank of Ukraine and foreign minister under the previous President Viktor Yushchenko, he is a firm advocate of the austerity policies demanded by the EU and IMF.

Former boxer Vitali Klitschko is the head of the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance—a creation of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its think tank, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

This week, Klitschko vehemently defended his collaboration with the third main party in the opposition coalition, the neo-fascist *Svoboda* party led by ultra-nationalist Oleh Tyahnybok, in an interview with the *Guardian* newspaper.

On Saturday evening, Klitschko told a crowd gathered in Kyiv's central Independence Square that the opposition coalition of parties rejected the offer of concessions from the government. He urged the crowd to continue demonstrating until President Viktor Yanukovich stood down.

Already last Wednesday, Klitschko had called for a stepping up of the protests against the Yanukovich government. He has also signaled that the protesters might try to kill top government officials, tweeting: "Viktor Yanukovich, do not go down the same road as Ceausescu and Gaddafi"—referring to Romanian Stalinist dictator Nikolai Ceausescu, who was murdered during the restoration of capitalism in Romania in 1989, and Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, murdered in 2011 at the end of the NATO war in Libya.

His renewed call for regime change on Saturday came as more evidence emerged of the role played by neo-fascist paramilitary organizations in violent confrontations in Kyiv and throughout the country.

Anti-government protesters are reported to have occupied local authority buildings in at least nine regions of the country.

Hundreds stormed a municipal building in the city of Vinnytsia, nearly 200 kilometres southwest of the capital. Similar attempts have been reported on Saturday at Poltava to the east of Kyiv, and at Chernigov to the north, near the border with Belarus.

In the western city of Lviv, a traditional stronghold of ultra-nationalist forces, protesters have been occupying

local government offices since last week.

According to a Channel 4 News report, the Right Sector group comprised of “autonomous nationalists,” which recruits from ultra-right football hooligan groups, are in the front line of confrontations with the police. Some 500 Right Sector militants are reportedly inside the government buildings seized by protesters.

One Ukrainian source told Channel 4 News that Right Sector is the most violent force on the streets: “These people are separate from Svoboda, though they will have many links through activists, but they are not controlled by any one group...They are the ones throwing Molotovs [cocktails] and trying to kill policemen, the most violent element fight at Independence Square.”

Also prominent in the demonstrations are paramilitaries from the Patriot of Ukraine group, the former paramilitary wing of Svoboda. Its thugs are featured on photos from recent protests, armed with chains and bricks and sporting fascist symbols on their shields.

The direct intervention by leading representatives of the EU, Germany and the US in the Ukrainian protests threatens to split the country in two and provoke a civil war.

Top US and EU officials such as US Senator John McCain and German EU parliamentarian Elmar Brok have visited the Ukrainian protesters and endorsed their campaign against the government.

While nationalist and openly fascist forces have gone on the offensive in the west of Ukraine, supporters of Yanukovich have taken to the streets in a number of cities in the president’s eastern power base, the Donets Basin.

The escalating Western-backed protests also could provoke an outright confrontation with Russia, the Yanukovich regime’s main backer, with incalculable consequences for the region and the world. Nonetheless, Western officials and media are continuing to recklessly press for an escalation of the conflict.

In an editorial last Wednesday, the *New York Times* greeted the sanctions announced last week by the US State Department against leading Ukrainian politician as a “good step” but proclaimed that “additional steps” were necessary.

Having unleashed the most reactionary forces in the

Ukraine and driven it to the brink of civil war, sections of the Western ruling elites are now discussing the merits of intervening more aggressively inside the Ukraine in pursuit of their imperialist interests.

In its Sunday edition, the *Wall Street Journal* pointed out the strategic importance of the region, noting: “The bulk of Europe’s energy supplies come through Ukraine, and pipelines crisscross the western regions with local governments that on Thursday fell to anti-Yanukovich demonstrators.”

The *Journal* declares, “The strategic reality is that only Washington can lead an effort to pull Ukraine out of Moscow’s orbit.” Accusing the EU of being “divided and irresolute,” it concludes: “Worrying parallels to Europe’s mishandling of the Balkans in the early 1990s aren’t far-fetched.”

The *Journal*’s comparison of the situation in Ukraine today with the Balkan Wars of the 1990s points to the risks posed by the reckless US-EU policy in Ukraine: the unleashing of proxy wars between NATO and Russia, and even a direct military clash between NATO and Russia—as nearly occurred at the Pristina airport in 1999, during the Kosovo War.

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