

Kiev regime pursues east Ukraine offensive, threatens to ban Communist Party

By Christoph Dreier
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Since last weekend, the Ukrainian army has been preparing intensively for a major offensive against the two large cities still controlled by pro-Russian separatists in east Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk. The escalation of the war is being accompanied by widespread repression throughout Ukraine.

On Wednesday, the leader of the Ukrainian transitional government Arseniy Yatsenyuk declared at a government meeting that he had called on the general state prosecutor, the SBU intelligence agency and the interior ministry, to pursue all persons suspected of supporting the separatists in eastern Ukraine.

He explicitly included members of parliament. “Everyone, without exception, should be held to account,” said the Prime Minister.

His threats are above all aimed at the former governing Party of the Regions (PR) and the Ukrainian Communist Party (KPU), which have maintained a critical stance to the war in the east of the country. A number of deputies were already driven from the country during the fascist-led coup in February, in order to secure a majority for the new government. Now all deputies who do not follow the government’s line are to be brought before the courts.

In addition, President Petro Poroshenko ratified a law punishing support for the resistance in eastern Ukraine with prison sentences of five to seven years. Those convicted will not be allowed to hold political office for a specified period of time, and their property can be confiscated.

The KPU is to be banned entirely and its members imprisoned. According to Yatsenyuk, the policy entails “banning those who are attacking the independence of Ukraine and the country’s constitutional order.”

Justice Minister Pavel Petrenko lodged an application to ban the party in a regional administrative court,

citing several charges of illegal activity against the KPU. The Communist Party rejected the allegations, charging that the evidence had been falsified.

At the last parliamentary elections, the KPU received 13.2 percent of the vote, giving it 32 of the 450 deputies. The party is oriented towards Moscow and oligarchs close to Russia, and supports the separatist movement in the east.

The state prosecutor also announced that the Maidan in Kiev would be forcibly cleared if necessary. The extreme right-wing and fascist forces which fought during the protests on the square and then led the February putsch have been the main base of the Kiev regime ever since.

Many of the Maidan combatants have since been integrated into the national guard and sent to the front. Those who remain are continuing to occupy government buildings and placing demands on the government to proceed more forcefully against the separatists. On several occasions there have been exchanges of fire with security forces.

The action against the Maidan fighters is aimed at consolidating the power of the state so it can proceed more effectively against widespread popular opposition to its policies of civil war and social austerity. The expansion of the offensive against the separatists in the east can only be implemented if this opposition is suppressed.

After the Ukrainian army took important positions from the pro-Russian separatists, the security and defence council reported on Thursday that combat forces controlled 13 of the 18 districts of the Donetsk region and 10 of the 18 districts in the Luhansk region.

A representative of the separatist people’s defence general staff told Russian news agency RIA Novosti, “The general picture can be briefly given as follows:

the enemy's troops are continuing to converge around Donetsk. We are trying to disrupt them."

There have been repeated clashes in the region, particularly around airports. According to Ukrainian defence ministry sources, three soldiers were killed on Wednesday alone, and 27 more injured. On Tuesday, two people were killed in an artillery attack on a minibus in Luhansk.

According to eye-witness reports, a residential property was subsequently bombarded by the Ukrainian army. Drinking water in the city is reportedly running low.

On Wednesday, Poroshenko made a brief visit to Slavyansk, the city retaken on Saturday. Speaking to representatives of the military, he declared that he was not prepared to reach a peaceful agreement with the rebels unless they surrendered and laid down their weapons. The President announced a "magnificent major offensive." The security and defence council also reported that "the liberation of Donetsk and Luhansk is under way."

The Ukrainian government received backing from the US and European Union (EU). In a telephone conversation on Wednesday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande called on Poroshenko to practice military restraint in order to keep civilian casualties low. But they also made clear that they support the acts of repression.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier announced a €3.5 million increase in already approved emergency aid to rebuild cities in the east damaged in the fighting.

Despite the paltry character of the sum, given the vast damage done to east Ukrainian cities, Poroshenko gushed: "We interpret this not only as a financial decision, but also as very important moral support on the part of the EU states."

EU representatives agreed on Wednesday evening on the establishment of travel bans and the freezing of accounts for eleven further individuals. The names are to be officially made public on Friday. As a result, a total of 71 people have been affected by EU sanctions. Reports suggest that the names added mainly concern representatives of the separatists.

The US has been pressing for some time for an intensification of sanctions against Russia. The Interfax-Ukraine news agency cited a White House

spokesman as saying "President [Barack Obama] has cooperated very closely with our alliance partners to ensure that we take coordinated action to further isolate Russia if necessary."

The Russian foreign minister responded with considerable restraint to the threat of more sanctions and the offensive by the Ukrainian army. He called on the EU states to ensure observance of last week's agreement, which proposed unconditional talks between the warring parties.

The German daily *Handelsblatt* reported that incidents on the border where fighters and weapons have reached Ukraine have dropped sharply in recent days. According to the newspaper's reports, Moscow has distanced itself sharply from the separatists over the past few days.

By contrast, the arrest of Ukrainian soldier Nadia Savtchenko in Russia produced tensions. She was accused by Russian authorities of responsibility for the deaths of two journalists. Kiev has claimed that Savtchenko was kidnapped, while Moscow has stated that she was arrested on Russian territory.

Agreements with the EU and IMF contain plans for brutal social attacks and the cutting of subsidies. Poroshenko recently announced on his website that billions of euros currently spent on science would be redirected to the military.

The social situation in the country is already dire. The national bank predicts a rate of inflation of 17 percent in 2014. The government anticipates a decline in GDP of 5 percent, while the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development expects it to be 7 percent.

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