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Ukrainian President Wants More Powers for Reforms

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KIEV — Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych called on Tuesday for the constitution to be reformed to strengthen his powers and enable him to push through painful and unpopular economic reforms.

Former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, now an opposition leader, accused Yanukovych of moving Ukraine toward authoritarianism despite his pledges to keep the country on a democratic path.

Yanukovych, in his first Independence Day speech since taking office in February, said the country needed a new, stable system led by a "strong president."

"I see a renewed Ukraine as a state with a stable political system, and I am ready to propose a formula for this to society," he told a gathering of dignitaries in Kiev.

"It means a strong president who has real powers to coordinate and control the implementation of key reform issues and the country's strategic course," Yanukovych said.

"In order to achieve this, we need to reform the constitution thoroughly."

Yanukovych, 60, with financial backing from some of Ukraine's wealthiest businessmen, won a bitter election battle against Tymoshenko.

Tymoshenko said her bloc would propose its own constitutional reform but gave no details.

"The new power has no control [over it], no responsibility," Tymoshenko said. "If authoritarian regimes, dictators and tyrants can emerge in Ukraine under the constitution, then it means the constitution is not working to the full extent."

Critics say there are already signs of pressure on the media to toe the official line, though Yanukovych said Tuesday that he would strenuously protect the rights of free press.

Ukraine curbed presidential powers in favor of parliament through constitutional amendments introduced in 2004 when Viktor Yushchenko became president after the Orange Revolution street demonstrations.

The curbs, promoted by Yanukovych's supporters at the time, limited Yushchenko's effectiveness as president and set up confrontation with the parliament and Tymoshenko, his prime minister.

The wrangling paralyzed decision making and ultimately contributed to his downfall in this year's elections.

Yanukovych supporters now say his hand should be strengthened so he can push through unpopular reforms such as raising household gas prices and slimming down the bloated pension system.

Many of the reforms have been implemented under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, which has extended a new $15 billion standby arrangement to Ukraine to help stabilize its economy, battered by the global crisis.

If the 2004 curbs were lifted, Yanukovych would effectively rule in a presidential system similar to that of many other former Soviet states, including Russia, with the right to name all government ministers.

A first move to revise the constitution through a referendum failed last month after several parties including the Communists and the Lytvyn bloc, which are both part of the pro-Yanukovych coalition, refused to support it.

The parliament agreed then to revisit the proposal in September.

Since taking office, Yanukovych has tilted foreign policy sharply back toward Russia, on which Ukraine relies heavily for supplies of natural gas.

He has expanded economic ties and renewed the lease of Russia's Black Sea Fleet at the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol, allowing the Russian Navy to stay there until 2042.

But Yanukovych insisted Tuesday that taking Ukraine into the European mainstream was still

the focus of his foreign policy.

"European integration remains the priority in Ukraine's development," he said.

"It is obvious that the improvement of our ties with Russia does not hinder European integration," he said. "On the contrary, it helps it."

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