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Ukraine Offers New Deadline for EU Deal

By Anatoly Medetsky

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Ukrainian students beating drums at a rally in support of EU integration in Kiev on Tuesday. Protests over the matter have been ongoing since Thursday. **Vasily Fedosenko / REUTERS**

President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday told EU officials to refrain from strong language over Ukraine's decision last week to freeze preparations for a trade agreement with Europe in favor of tighter ties with Russia.

Russia and Ukraine are part of a free-trade zone, Putin said, and the lowering of trade barriers between Ukraine and the EU envisaged in the association agreement would enable European goods to flood the Russian market, gravely threatening the country's fragile economy.

Kiev's sharp turnaround, announced just days before the planned signing at a summit in Vilnius, sent shockwaves through Brussels, the seat of the EU government, and prompted tens of thousands of Ukrainians to take to the streets in protest.

Speaking on a visit to Italy Tuesday, Putin asked “our good friends in Brussels and my good personal friends in the European Commission” to tame their rhetoric, questioning “why we

should choke off whole sectors of our economy to please them?"

"We are not ready to just throw open the gates for European goods," Putin said, Interfax reported. "We understand that cooperation with the EU presents us hope of restructuring and modernizing our economy, and we intend to do just that," the president said, but that time and investment were needed first.

Putin urged the depoliticization of the issue, and endorsed a Ukrainian initiative to set up three-way talks between the two countries and the EU.

Ukraine's Prime Minister Mykola Azarov on Tuesday also pushed the tripartite format, and raised the prospect of signing a free trade deal with the European Union next spring.

In an interview with foreign reporters, Azarov said Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, traveling to the EU summit in Vilnius that was intended to host the signing ceremony for the free trade deal later this week, would call discussions involving Russia on the agreement. He didn't say what Ukraine was hoping to achieve at the talks, if they took place.

"I am hoping that Yanukovich will bring up the issue of these consultations when in Vilnius," Azarov said, adding that, should the parties arrive to a solution, Ukraine and the EU could sign the free trade pact at their bilateral summit next spring, Interfax reported.

The EU is holding a meeting of its Eastern Partnership program in the Lithuanian capital on Nov. 28-29, and the key goal was to sign an association agreement with Ukraine, which would have marked a dramatic success for EU diplomacy. Russia was up in arms against ceding influence over an important trade partner and a former fellow Soviet republic.

In Kiev, at least 2,000 students marched to the central Independence Square on Tuesday to join a camp set up by pro-EU protesters. About 100 people picketed the Cabinet building under light snow, demanding that Azarov step down, as riot police looked on.

On Monday, tensions flared to a greater extent, triggering the use of tear gas by police. Jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko launched a protest hunger strike that day in support of the European agreement.

Russia on Tuesday attempted to wash its hands of Ukraine's U-turn. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov rejected EU's accusations that Moscow had bullied Kiev into backtracking on the decisive foreign policy shift.

"It's out of place to talk about any pressure," he said, Interfax reported.

His comments came a day after European Commission President JosO Manuel Barroso and European Council President Herman Van Rompuy expressed strong disapproved of Russia's "position and actions" over Ukraine in a joint statement.

Moscow wants Kiev to join the Russia-led customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, and said Ukraine's economy would suffer a major blow if the country were to go with the EU. Ukraine's biggest trade partner, Russia has briefly exercised additional checks on Ukrainian imports, stalling the flow of goods; demanded immediate payment of back debts for natural gas; and threatened to halt economic cooperation projects as it raised stakes about Ukraine's

western leaning in recent months.

Putin on Tuesday rebuffed accusations using natural resources as diplomatic weaponry, saying "Gazprom and [Ukrainian state-owned] Naftogaz have a contract that is signed until 2019, and we did not discuss revising the contract"

Russia has long complained that the EU has unfairly pressured Kiev.

EU leaders have stressed that the offer to Kiev remains on the table, but Yanukovich has given no indication that he will reverse his decision.

Russia's success in persuading Ukraine to reject a trade pact with the EU is a "Pyrrhic victory" that will cost Moscow economically, said EU chair Lithuania, host of a summit this week where the deal had been due to be signed.

Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite, whose country has also clashed with Russia on trade issues, said that Kiev should have resisted Moscow's pressure and gone ahead with the planned signing of the pact at the summit in Vilnius on Friday.

"I would call this a Pyrrhic victory for Russia," Grybauskaite said in an interview late Monday.

"This will be an expensive present for Russia, a country which also has economic hardship ... I do not think this will be a joyous present," Grybauskaite added, alluding to Ukraine's heavy debt load and other economic woes. (Reuters)

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