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Ukraine Protesters Hold Firm as US, EU Step Up Diplomacy

By The Moscow Times

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About 2,000 pro-Europe protesters huddled by fire pit in their main tent camp in snowbound Kiev on Tuesday, defying riot police who herded them away from government buildings overnight.

Dozens of riot police removed barricades leading to the presidency, cabinet offices and parliament. But the demonstrators, who reject Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych's policy lurch towards Russia, have regrouped at Independence Square in central Kiev, where they have set up a makeshift tent village.

With the crisis weighing on an economy already on the brink of bankruptcy, the cost of insuring Ukrainian debt rose to the highest in four years on Tuesday, and bond prices fell sharply.

Yanukovych is due to hold talks with three former Ukrainian presidents to try and find a basis

for wider talks involving the opposition parties.

In a flurry of diplomacy highlighting the struggle between East and West over Ukraine, which scrapped a trade pact with Europe last month and opted to rebuild ties with Moscow instead, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland flew to Kiev.

European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton was also due to arrive later Tuesday, and U.S. Vice President Joe Biden spoke to Yanukovych by telephone.

Nuland went to see leaders of the three main opposition parties, the opposition said. Other details of her program and whether she would meet Yanukovych were not immediately known.

Demonstrators had feared that the arrival of the riot police on Monday heralded a plan to crush the protests, but there was none of the violence seen a week earlier, when dozens of protesters were wounded in clashes.

Ilya Shutov, an ex-miner from the eastern city of Donetsk, said the protesters would stay until Yanukovych left office.

"We were for the EU Association Agreement because we thought it would force our authorities to be civilized. Their refusal of Europe is a refusal to be civilized," he said.

"Our goal is to get rid of the Soviet-like authorities."

Nuland arrived in Kiev from talks in Moscow, where the U.S. Embassy said she expressed "deep concern" about the situation in Ukraine and urged Russia to use its influence to press for "peace, human dignity and a political solution."

"The U.S. supports Ukraine's European choice, a nonviolent and just political resolution to the current standoff, and a return to economic health with the support of the International Monetary Fund," the embassy said.

Biden told Yanukovych by telephone on Monday that there was a "need to immediately de-escalate the situation and begin a dialogue with opposition leaders on developing a consensus way forward for Ukraine."

"He noted that violence has no place in a democratic society and is incompatible with our strategic relationship," a White House statement said.

Russia's lower house of parliament was expected to approve a statement rejecting interference in Ukraine by Western politicians, following a visit to the protests last week by Germany's foreign minister.

Mass Protests

In Kiev, liberals and nationalists alike have taken to the streets for demonstrations, and thousands have maintained an around-the-clock protest camp in the city center, blocked roads, besieged government buildings and occupied the capital's city hall.

Hundreds of thousands of people marched Sunday, the second weekend in a row that huge crowds have vented fury at a government they accuse of returning Ukraine to Kremlin control. In a potent symbol, they tore down and smashed the capital's main statue of Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin.

A week earlier, baton-wielding police injured scores of people at similar demonstrations. The police have since held back from using force to dislodge the protesters, but gave them five days from last Thursday to leave the streets.

The protesters say they will not go.

"We will stand here till the end to defend our rights," said Sergei Kuzan, 29, a lawyer, part of a self-appointed security team ready to defend barricades at the main tented camp in Kiev's central Independence Square. "My task is not to let the police through, nor the provocateurs."

The tented vigil in freezing temperatures copies a tactic from the Orange Revolution in 2004, which successfully overturned a fraudulent election victory by Yanukovych.

Ukraine's dire finances have both provoked the crisis and been worsened by it. EU leaders say their trade pact would have brought investment, but Ukraine's Soviet-era industry relies on Russian natural gas, giving the Kremlin enormous leverage.

Kiev is due to pay just under $4 billion in debt repayments and Russian gas bills in the first three months of 2014. Its foreign reserves have been eroded to prop up the local hryvna currency. The country's Central Bank figures on Friday revealed only enough foreign currency on hand for less than two months of imports.

Yanukovych met President Vladimir Putin last week, raising opposition suspicions that the Ukrainian president agreed to bring the country of 46 million into a Moscow-led Customs Union of ex-Soviet states. Moscow and Kiev deny the Customs Union was discussed.

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