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Lavrov Says Provocateurs Behind 'Hysteria' of Ukraine Protests

By The Moscow Times

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Ukrainian demonstrators were over-reacting to the country's policy swerve to Russia and criticized the West for excessive involvement in the protests on Kiev's Independence Square.

Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych's decision to spurn a trade and cooperation pact with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Russia has triggered weeks of unrest with protesters demanding dismissal of his government.

Protesters streamed into the capital over the weekend to attend a mass opposition rally on Sunday, joining the thousands already camped out on Kiev's main square.

The size and intensity of the protests suggest some external force has been stoking dissent, Lavrov told Russian news channel Rossia 24.

"There is no doubt that provocateurs are behind this. The fact that our Western partners have apparently lost touch with reality is a great sadness to me," he said.

The outpouring of public anger is disproportionate, Lavrov said in an interview filmed during his trip to Tehran last week but broadcast on Saturday.

"It is astounding how the country is on the brink of hysteria due to a sovereign decision by the legitimate government of Ukraine," he said.

"What did Yanukovych's government do? ... Maybe they announced they would build an atomic bomb? Or maybe they shot someone?"

Lavrov also joined Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in expressing disapproval of EU politicians, such as EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, who have visited protest sites in recent weeks. Medvedev said Friday that the appearance of European politicians at the Kiev protests was "crude interference" in Ukraine's internal affairs.

"Imagine if I went to Germany... [and] walked among protesters who support parties calling for Germany to change its relationship toward the EU," Lavrov said.

"I think the European Parliament, NATO, the Council of Europe and the OSCE would pass a resolution on how outrageous it is for Russia to involve itself in sovereign Germany's internal affairs."

On Friday, U.S. Senators issued a resolution calling for the U.S. to consider sanctions against Ukraine in case there is further violence against peaceful demonstrators. Two senators including John McCain, a leading Republican voice on foreign policy issues, had planned to attend Sunday's rally.

Despite talks in Brussels by his government aimed at securing financial aid from the EU for his near-bankrupt country, Yanukovych appears on course to go to Moscow on Dec. 17 to tie up a trade agreement that the opposition fears could slam the door on integration with Europe.

In the interview, Lavrov said the door was still open for Ukraine to join the Customs Union with Russia provided it is willing to sign up to all its conditions.

However, he said the union was not an attempt to protect members' trade interests at the expense of the EU.

"We have repeatedly offered to gradually and collectively build a common economic humanitarian zone stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok," Lavrov said.

Western powers should stop meddling in Ukraine's affairs and manipulating the "opinions of the people" about a trade pact with the European Union, China's official government newswire said on Friday.

"The West must keep its hands off the domestic affairs of a sovereign nation," the commentary said. "Showing support for the anti-government protesters is a serious blow to Ukrainian democracy, not to mention that it could complicate regional affairs." *(Reuters)*

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