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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Yanukovych Slams the West, Tilts Toward Russia

By The Moscow Times

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Yanukovych supporters watching him speak while at a rally on Thursday. **Gleb Garanich**

KIEV, Ukraine — Ukraine's embattled president harshly criticized the West for supporting the massive street protests calling for his ouster and announced plans to partially join a Moscow-led economic union — a move that is likely to deepen Ukraine's political crisis.

Speaking in a televised interview with some hand-picked journalists on Thursday, President Viktor Yanukovych criticized foreign nations for meddling in Ukraine's internal affairs.

Senior Western diplomats have in recent weeks attended and expressed support for the sprawling demonstrations on Kiev's Independence Square, known as the Maidan. Assistant U.S. Secretary of State Victoria Nuland even gave out sandwiches to protesters there.

"It is very important. This is our internal matter," Yanukovych said. "And let some countries not meddle in our internal affairs and not believe that they can be bosses here."

"I am categorically against having someone come here and teach us how to live," a visibly angered Yanukovych added.

Yanukovych has faced nearly a month of angry protests since his abrupt decision to shelve a political and trade agreement with the 28-nation European Union and turn toward Russia instead. The rallies grew larger, swelling to hundreds of thousands, after riot police violently broke up the first small protests, injuring dozens.

The president's fiery comments came two days after Russia announced a major bailout loan for Ukraine, which has been facing a possible default. President Vladimir Putin's economic package for Ukraine includes a pledge to buy $15 billion worth of Ukrainian state bonds and a sharp discount on Russian natural gas for Ukrainian customers.

In Moscow, Putin insisted that the bailout was driven by a desire to help a neighbor that was in dire straits and was not aimed at breaking off Ukraine's ties with the EU.

"We have nothing to do with that whatsoever," Putin said.

Putin also rejected allegations that Russia could send its troops into Ukraine to annex the eastern, mostly Russian, part of the country and split it in two. The eastern region has been mostly against the anti-government protests in Kiev.

"This is sheer nonsense," Putin said.

Commenting on the deal with Putin, Yanukovych signaled that Ukraine might now commit to some parts of a Moscow-led Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, even though protesters say that would put Ukraine back under Russia's yoke, just like in Soviet times.

Yanukovych also said talks will resume on joint Russian-Ukrainian operation of Ukraine's strategic pipeline system, which carries Russian natural gas to Europe.

"Ukraine must find such a model of relations with strategic partners that would be acceptable to everybody," Yanukovych said.

Analysts said, however, that such moves contradict the EU deal and would be rejected by the opposition.

"Let's just be absolutely clear, this is totally incompatible with existing agreements with the EU and will not be taken as a further sign that the government is serious at all about European integration," said Tim Ash, an emerging markets analyst with Standard Bank in London.

The president's comments were likely to provoke anger from the protesters who have occupied central Kiev for nearly a month.

Jailed former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, a top opposition leader, denounced Yanukovych's agreements with Moscow as state treason.

"On Dec. 17, 2013, Yanukovych annulled Ukraine as an independent entity," Tymoshenko said in a statement Thursday. The West views her jailing as politically motivated, but Yanukovych

has resisted pressure to release her.

But even though the center of the Ukrainian capital was blockaded by gigantic barricades, Yanukovych claimed the country's political crisis was drawing to a close.

"The fact that lawmakers have returned to parliament and that it has begun working is a sign that the political crisis is being overcome," Yanukovych said.

Yanukovych ridiculed opposition leaders and said he would not tolerate any illegal attempts to seize power. He urged the opposition to focus on the 2015 election, skirting the question of whether he would run for re-election.

"These are political opportunists," Yanukovych said of the opposition leaders. "What are they selling? Oratory. They are covering up their actual helplessness, lack of professionalism and responsibility."

Some experts believe Yanukovych is hoping that the protesters will disperse on their own, as he faces a threat of Western sanctions if he resorts to violence again.

"Yanukovych has no serious reasons to disperse the Maidan with force," said political analyst Vadim Karasyov. "They will be waiting for the Maidan to dissipate on its own after New Year's."

But many protesters say they have no plans to go home while Yanukovych is still in power.

"Ukrainians will not accept this kind of sell-off," said protester Anatoly Sushchenya, 31.

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