

EU Urges Ukraine to Scrap Anti-Protest Laws

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A protester standing in front of a burning police bus during a rally near government buildings in Kiev on Monday. **Valentyn Ogirenko**

BRUSSELS — The European Union is urging Ukraine to scrap new laws that are viewed as curtailing fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and the holding of peaceful protests.

The 28-nation bloc's foreign ministers said Monday that the laws rammed through Ukraine's Parliament last week under "doubtful procedural circumstances" must be scrapped.

Ukraine has been shaken since November by massive public protests after Russia lured the country's leaders with financial incentives to ditch closer cooperation with the EU.

The laws are widely seen as an attempt to silence the protests — but new rallies over the weekend drew tens of thousands of people and turned violent.

The EU statement calls on all parties to "exercise restraint," urging authorities "to fully respect and protect the peaceful demonstrators' right to assembly and speech."

After a night of vicious streets battles, anti-government protesters and police clashed anew Monday in Kiev. Hundreds of protesters, many wearing balaclavas, hurled rocks and stun grenades and police responded with tear gas.

Sunday's violence came after President Viktor Yanukovich pushed through the sweeping anti-protest law, which significantly increased fines and imposed jail terms for unauthorized street protests. The new law also prohibits activists from wearing helmets or masks to demonstrations, curbs free speech and limits the ability to investigate or monitor the activity of officials, including judges. The law also restricts the activity of nongovernmental organizations funded by the West, as many are in Ukraine.



Valentyn Ogirenko / Reuters

A pro-European integration protester sitting in a burned out police bus.

The law mirrors anti-opposition legislation passed in Russia, prompting accusations that Yanukovich is following in President Vladimir Putin's footsteps in building a police state. The U.S. has called the legislation "undemocratic."

The law has highlighted Yanukovich's disregard for the protests, which have been calling for his ouster, the restoration of civil rights and a pro-Western course for Ukraine. Yet demonstrators have been frustrated as well with the fragmented and often indecisive opposition.

During a large peaceful protest Sunday, the crowd chanted "Leader!" asking for the selection of one single protest leader who would take charge. When that did not happen, hundreds

broke off from the main rally and marched toward parliament, where they began attacking riot police with sticks, firebombs and stones. Police responded with tear gas, water cannons and plastic bullets.

Opposition leader Vitali Klitschko, the world heavyweight boxing champion, tried to stop the violence, but was attacked by the radical protesters.

"We are tired of waiting, we must push the changes ourselves, we must change the leaders," said Petro Sopotensky, a 28-year-old protester.

Intent on preventing what he called a possible civil war, Klitschko went to Yanukovich's home Sunday night and emerged with a promise of negotiations. But the president appointed the embattled national security council head Andriy Klyuyev, whom the opposition blames for the violent dispersal of the student rally, to lead the talks. On Monday, Klitschko insisted that the president must personally take part. He also called on all Ukrainians to rush to Kiev to defend the country's future.

"Get into cars, shuttle buses, buses," he said in a video address. "You are needed here so that Ukraine is the winner, not Yanukovich."

Opposition leaders have been urging the EU and the U.S. to impose sanctions on top Ukrainian officials and Yanukovich's financial backers, but so far Western diplomats have only threatened sanctions and issued harsh statements. Hundreds of activists rallied outside the EU office in Kiev on Monday, chanting "We need your help!" in English and holding posters that read "No sanctions, no peace."

"The reaction of the international community has been inadequate," said Valeriy Chalyi, head of the Razumkov Center think tank. "We are talking about Ukraine's independence. And if one does not understand this today, tomorrow it will be too late."

The pro-Western protests in Kiev began Nov. 21 after Yanukovich shelved a long-planned political and economic treaty with the EU and then accepted a huge bailout package from Putin instead. The protests swelled to hundreds of thousands — the biggest since Ukraine's 2004 pro-democracy Orange Revolution — after riot police violently broke up a small peaceful student protest. Clashes broke out on Dec. 1 between radical protesters and police, but demonstrations since then have been peaceful.

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