

Russia Condemns Kiev Protests 'Driven From Abroad'

By [Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber](#)

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Demonstrators at protests in Kiev singing the national anthem amid ongoing unrest after street clashes provoked by new anti-protest legislation. **Sergei Chuzavkov**

Correction appended

KIEV — Russian officials have publicly condemned the escalation of clashes between protesters and police in Kiev on Tuesday but reiterated that Russia would steer clear of Ukraine's domestic affairs.

Protests have intensified in the past two days in response to Ukraine's new anti-protest law, which is viewed by critics as an attempt to stifle the protests that have shaken the country since President Viktor Yanukovich shunned an association agreement with the European Union in November in favor of closer ties with Russia.

Sergei Naryshkin, speaker of the State Duma, instructed the Duma's Committee on the

Commonwealth of Independent States on Tuesday to draft a statement on the aggravation of the situation in Ukraine that will likely be raised at the Duma's plenary session Wednesday.

Russian media outlets have reported that the Duma's statement would be "harsh," and would likely blame Ukrainian nationalists and foreign agitators for sparking the ongoing unrest.

But apart from a statement, it seems Russia will likely refrain from taking further steps, at least for the time being.

At his annual news conference on Tuesday, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that while Russia was ready to serve as an interlocutor in resolving the conflict in Ukraine, the country would only intervene if assistance was "requested."

Lavrov also said protests in Kiev were "spinning out of control" and that they were "largely driven from abroad," though he stopped short of offering insight regarding Russia's next move on the matter.

"We are convinced that the internal problems of any country, including Ukraine, should be resolved through dialogue in the constitutional and legal field, without any outside interference," Lavrov said, according to a transcript on the Foreign Ministry's website.

The "outside interference" in question — according to Lavrov — is that of some European governments who "rushed into Euromaidan, participated in anti-government protests in a country with which they have diplomatic relations."

"That is simply inappropriate," Lavrov said.

In December, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and Guido Westerwelle, the then-foreign minister of Germany, visited the anti-government protesters in Kiev.

In addition to rebuking the EU, Lavrov also challenged the Ukrainian opposition's European aspirations.

"The occupation of City Hall and government buildings by gunmen for a few weeks — can you imagine if that happened in the EU? Would it be possible? They would never have allowed that," Lavrov said.

The head of the Duma's Foreign Relations Committee, Alexei Pushkov, shared Lavrov's harsh stance on Europe's approach to the protests in Ukraine.

"Europe and the U.S. say that Ukraine is ready for democracy," Pushkov said in a telephone interview. "That is a myth."

While Russian government officials have been playing the "noninterference" card and deflecting blame on the EU, pro-Kremlin political analysts have insisted on the need to safeguard Russia's presence in Ukraine.

"Russia is interested in stability in Ukraine," said Alexei Mukhin, general director of the Moscow-based Center for Political Information, in a telephone interview. "Ukraine is

an important country for Russia, and Russia has the right to protect its national interests when they are being threatened."

Mukhin also denied that Yanukovych's new anti-protest law, which criminalizes anti-government protests and the slandering of government officials, resembles similar Russian legislation.

"The anti-protest laws in Russia were thoroughly discussed in society before they were adopted," Mukhin said. "They were even adapted to provide a compromise with society's demands. This was not the case in Ukraine."

According to the Ukrainian Interior Ministry, 32 protesters have already been arrested under the new anti-protest law implemented Tuesday.

But the finger-pointing between Russia and the EU seems to have lost its momentum on the ground in Kiev. Protesters' discontent — which initially was targeted at Ukraine's turning away from Europe — seems to have morphed into a virulent campaign to oust Yanukovych.

Protesters had been clashing with police on Vulitsya Grushevskogo nonstop from Sunday to Tuesday, reacting to several laws signed by Yanukovych that demonstrators say severely restrict people's rights and effectively introduce a dictatorship. On Tuesday morning, they agreed to a ceasefire when Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Buddhist clergy urged both sides to stop the violence.

Some demonstrators then began strengthening the barricades on Vulitsya Grushevskogo, using the buses they had burned earlier, while others chatted with police, trying to persuade them to come over to their side. One girl carried a poster saying "I will marry the riot policeman who switches to the people's side."

Several demonstrators also warned that Russian intervention would only make matters worse.

Roman Krutko, a 35-year-old businessman at the protests, said that if Putin tried to save Yanukovych, a revolt would begin and Western Ukraine might secede.

Denis Korenkov, a 34-year-old sociologist and a Baptist who joined representatives of other religions on Vulitsya Grushevskogo, said the Association Agreement with the EU and relations with Russia had ceased to be the main issue after a crackdown on protesters on Euromaidan in November triggered an unprecedented backlash.

"When those students were beaten, we stopped caring about the Association Agreement," he said.

As more justification for that sentiment, he said the \$15 billion loan given to Ukraine from Russia in December was likely to be stolen by corrupt Ukrainian officials anyway.

"I will not get that money," he said.

"This loan is a noose on the nation's neck," said Timofei, a 67-year-old pensioner who did not give his last name because he was afraid of repercussions from authorities. "It will be used by a bunch of billionaires for their own purposes," he said.

Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber reported from Moscow, and Oleg Sukhov reported from Kiev.

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Editor's note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly put the amount of the Russian loan to Ukraine at \$15 million. The actual amount is \$15 billion.

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