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Russia Slams West's 'Conniving Politics' in Ukraine

By Allison Quinn

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A protester passing burning vans and the destroyed building of Ukraine's security service in Lviv as violence continued across the country Wednesday. **Marian Striltsiv**

The Kremlin on Wednesday denounced ongoing violence in Ukraine as an "attempted coup by radicals," as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov lashed out at the West and Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych declared Thursday a day of mourning.

By Wednesday evening, at least 26 people were confirmed dead during clashes in Kiev that flared up Tuesday afternoon when opposition protesters began to suspect that their demands were being ignored by authorities. Overnight, the violence had spread to at least three other cities, with protesters having set fire to administrative buildings in Kiev, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk and Ternopol, according to various media reports.

About 800 people had been injured in the clashes in Kiev alone, with about half of those wounded being security forces, Interfax reported, citing a Ukrainian police official.

At a news conference in Kuwait City on Wednesday, Lavrov pinned the blame on "radical oppositioners" who he said broke all the deals made for a compromise with Ukraine's leadership when they "began to throw Molotov cocktails at police and use firearms," Interfax reported.

REUTERS

Riot police in Kiev attempting to fend off Molotov cocktails tossed at them by anti-government protesters.

He also slammed "attempts by Western politicians to blame Russia for the situation," saying "any unbiased person with the slightest bit of sense can see" that claims of Russia trying to "re-Sovietize" former Soviet republics are untrue. He said that all parties should put the interests of Ukraine above their own geopolitical interests.

The protests in Ukraine have been ongoing since late November, when Yanukovych backtracked on a trade deal with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Russia. The move triggered diplomatic spats between Russia and the West, with both sides accusing each other of behind-the-scenes manipulation.

Last week, a solution appeared on the horizon when pro-European opposition activists agreed to evacuate the government buildings they had been occupying for months on the condition that jailed activists be released.

But on Monday, Russia announced that it was ready to resume previously halted financial aid to Kiev and send $2 billion as part of an earlier agreed-upon bailout. The announcement stirred concerns among the opposition that Yanukovych had made a deal with Moscow

and ignored its demands, a fear that was exacerbated Tuesday when the Ukrainian parliament appeared to stall in passing a bill that would limit presidential powers.

On Wednesday, as protesters in Kiev continued to blame President Vladimir Putin for the unfolding chaos, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the president "places all responsibility for what is happening in Ukraine on extremists."

"Moscow decisively condemns the violence by radical elements, which, in direct violation of all agreements reached earlier and having taken advantage of the fulfillment of the condition to free those earlier detained, immediately began to conduct violent actions," Peskov said, Interfax reported.

"Their actions may be interpreted in Moscow and elsewhere only as an attempt to overthrow the government," Peskov said, adding that Moscow supported dialogue between "all civilized political forces in Ukraine."

According to Peskov, Putin had a late-night conversation with Yanukovych on Tuesday in which the two "discussed the situation in Ukraine."

He did not elaborate on the details of the telephone conversation but warned against speculation.

"Any information that is being published about the supposed content of that conversation is nothing but a rumor and it does not correspond to reality," he said, RIA Novosti reported.

When asked about the second tranche of Russian aid to Kiev, which was expected this week, Peskov declined to comment, perhaps hoping to avoid fanning the flames in Kiev.

Moscow has maintained a policy of noninterference since the violence intensified on Tuesday, with the Foreign Ministry issuing a statement in which it said such supposed interference by the West was precisely what created the chaos in the first place.

"What is happening is a direct result of the conniving politics of Western politicians and European bodies, who from the very beginning of the crisis have closed their eyes to the actions of radical forces in Ukraine, and by doing so have encouraged them to escalate and further provoke legitimate powers," the statement said.

Moscow will use "all its influence" to bring peace to its "friendly brother state," the statement said.

The Foreign Ministry also slammed Ukrainian opposition leaders, saying it was "outraged by the opposition leaders' lack of a response to the actions of radicals."

"Nor do we see a sound reaction from European politicians and bodies, which refuse to acknowledge that all responsibility for the actions of radical forces in Ukraine rest with the opposition," the statement said.

By Wednesday evening, the most significant reaction from the EU was talk of possible sanctions. EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said he expected all 28 EU member states to approve sanctions "against those responsible for violence and use of excessive force"

at an emergency meeting in Brussels set for Thursday, Reuters reported.

The U.S. said it would also consider the use of sanctions and called on Russia to support international efforts to resolve the situation in Ukraine.

White House Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes said the U.S. administration wanted Yanukovych's government to remove riot police from Kiev's Independence Square in order to prevent further escalation of the crisis, Reuters reported.

Western diplomats were unanimous in their pleas for dialogue, urging all sides involved to refrain from violence.

UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon called on both protesters and authorities to "double up their efforts" to stop the crisis.

"Prevention of further instability and bloodshed is of primary importance, and all sides must strive to return Ukraine to a path of success and democracy as soon as possible," he said, Reuters reported.

Despite many protesters and opposition leaders in Ukraine invoking anti-Russian sentiment, Russian bloggers and cultural figures have been following the events in Ukraine closely.

More and more Russian bloggers have begun to describe the crisis as a "civil war" rather than just violent protests.

Journalist and activist Arkady Babchenko, reporting from Kiev, put the events unfolding there on a par with earlier crises that hit Russia and its former Soviet republics.

"It has been a long time since I have faced such a difficult business trip. This is comparable to Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. ... I definitely saw at least one dead body. Dozens of wounded. ...This is above my understanding," Babchenko wrote on Facebook, recalling violence from the Georgia-Russia War in 2008 and ethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

Former Kremlin spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky urged Russia not to physically interfere in the crisis, saying on Facebook that "Russia should help — but from its own territory and only diplomatically."

Many Russian opposition activists expressed admiration for protesters in Kiev.

When a photo of masked, armed men occupying a regional prosecutor's office went viral on Twitter, opposition leader Alexei Navalny remarked: "Great. It is better to have normal people in masks there than the usual criminals and thieves in prosecutors' uniforms."

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