

Exiled Ukraine Officials Announce 'Savior Committee' in Moscow

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Ukraine's former Prime Minister Nikolai Azarov demonstrates his passport to the media during a news conference in Moscow, Russia, Aug. 3, 2015.

A group of exiled Ukrainian officials led by former Prime Minister Nikolai Azarov announced Monday the formation of a so-called Savior of Ukraine Committee, which will actively work to remove the current pro-European government in Kiev that was swept to power on the back of popular protests last year.

The group, based in Russia, included Vladimir Oleinik, a former member of the ruling Party of Regions, who was put forward as a future Ukrainian president.

“To my deep regret, the committee is being created outside Ukraine, but I don't have any doubts that we will return and carry out our duty before the Ukrainian people,” Azarov, who is on Interpol's wanted list for alleged embezzlement, told reporters in Moscow's Ukraina Hotel.

The initiative is the first major political project to emerge from a coterie of senior Ukrainian officials who worked under ex-President Viktor Yanukovich. Many, including Yanukovich, fled to Russia last year after their Moscow-backed regime collapsed amid street demonstrations and violent clashes between police and protestors.

But there was one person conspicuously absent from Monday's lineup: Yanukovich himself.

Members of the committee said they had made the decision not to include people closely associated with Yanukovich, and made efforts to publicly distance themselves from the former president.

"This person is guilty: not less and perhaps more than the current junta in power in Kiev, and his place is on the defendant's bench with [Ukrainian President Petro] Poroshenko," said Igor Markov, who served as a deputy in the Ukrainian parliament from Yanukovich's Party of Regions until 2013.

Yanukovich has kept a low public profile — giving only a handful of interviews — since Russian special forces launched an operation to extract him from Ukraine after he fled from Kiev. He is detested by many inside the former Soviet country and has been disowned by most former supporters.

Azarov, who worked closely with Yanukovich and resigned as prime minister from Yanukovich's government in January 2014, also criticized his former boss. "I worked for this person for many years and there were several Viktor Fyodorovichs ... they were all, unfortunately, different Yanukovichs," Azarov told reporters.

Experts and officials in Kiev were quick to characterize the new committee as a Russian project designed to heighten instability inside Ukraine and promote a Kremlin-sponsored political agenda.

President Vladimir Putin's press secretary denied any ties to the committee. "The Kremlin, of course, does not have any link with this initiative," Peskov said, Russian news agency RIA Novosti reported.

The committee members called Monday for Ukraine to seek closer relations with Russia, and downplayed suggestions that Russia was providing rebel fighters in the east of the country with arms and supporting them with regular Russian troops. Instead, they highlighted what they described as significant influence wielded by the United States. "While you were looking for the hands of Moscow, you forgot the legs of America are already resting on the Ukrainian table," Oleinik said.

If he became president, Oleinik said he would begin negotiations with Moscow over the southern Ukrainian region of Crimea, which was annexed by Russia last year, and vowed to end fighting between rebels in the east of the country and forces loyal to Kiev.

"Immediately after my inauguration I would sign an order sending all troops back to their bases and go to [the rebel-controlled cities of] Luhansk and Donetsk ... and get on my knees before the people," he said.

Asked about the committee's income, Azarov and Oleinik dismissed costs as minimal and

refused to explain where their financing came from.

While they said the group already has people working inside Ukraine who were linked neither to the Yanukovich regime nor the current Ukrainian government, they were vague about concrete steps the organization would take. They did not specify how many members the committee has.

“We are talking about a change of the political leadership [for Ukraine],” said Azarov.

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