EUROPE NEWS

Ukraine's Pivot to Moscow Leaves West Out in the Cold

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Updated Dec. 2, 2013 9:21 p.m. ET

KIEV—President Viktor Yanukovych, facing the biggest political crisis in Ukraine in nearly a decade, reached out to the European Union on Monday in an apparent attempt to placate thousands of pro-Western demonstrators angry over his pivot toward Russia.

But the EU's executive reacted coolly to the request for new talks, telling Mr. Yanukovych that the sweeping trade deal he refused to sign last week after six years of talks wasn't open for renegotiation—and warning him against using force to disperse the crowds barricaded on Kiev’s main square.

The U.S. also expressed its disapproval of the latest developments. A State Department spokeswoman voiced concern Monday about weekend violence against demonstrators, and insisted that "European integration is the surest course to economic growth" for Ukraine.

Across the former Soviet Union, Moscow's increasingly tight embrace is forcing governments that had long sought to maneuver between Russia and the West to choose sides.
In his first public comments since riot police broke up antigovernment demonstrations, Mr. Yanukovych defended his decision to back away from the EU partnership agreement.

He had argued that European offers of financial aid for its flagging economy weren't rich enough to offset lost trade with Russia—and too often were encumbered with politically painful conditions mandated by the International Monetary Fund.

"What kind of agreement is it if they take us and bend us?" Mr. Yanukovych asked in a nationally televised interview Monday. "I, for one, think we shouldn't give in, we should defend our own interests."

A diplomat familiar with Mr. Yanukovych's call to European Commission president José Manuel Barroso on Monday described the tone as sober. The substance of their conversation was described by officials on both sides.

Mr. Yanukovych did find support from Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has pushed to reassert Moscow's influence over the former Soviet republics, and had threatened economic retaliation if Kiev pulled closer to the EU.

Echoing official denunciations of the demonstrations in Kiev, Mr. Putin said they "remind me not of a revolution but of a pogrom," adding that they were aimed at shaking Mr. Yanukovych's "legitimate government."

The Russian president was in Armenia, another former Soviet republic that shocked the EU earlier this fall by dropping plans for a trade deal in favor of closer ties with Moscow. Mr. Putin on Monday promised tax breaks on Russian fuel and discounts on weapons for Armenia, where a few protesters gathered to call for closer ties to the West.

Ukraine, a Texas-size country of some 46 million, is a much bigger prize for either side. A deepening economic crisis and waning patience in Moscow and Brussels have made the balancing act that the country has played out since independence in 1991 less and less tenable.

The government and opposition leaders alike were shocked by the size of weekend protests that drew hundreds of thousands of people, laying bare the challenge facing Mr. Yanukovych.

The country is split between pro-European regions in the west of the country and a more Russia-oriented east. Mr. Yanukovych had long enjoyed support in the eastern part and from Moscow, but had in recent years built closer ties with Brussels.

For the EU, the attempt to woo Ukraine was part of an ambitious project to use closer trade links as an incentive to democratize the countries to its east.

But Ukraine is equally vital to Mr. Putin's drive to build a Eurasian Union of former Soviet countries led by Russia. As the deadline to sign the EU deal approached, the Kremlin ratcheted up pressure, restricting trade with Ukraine's already-teetering economy and warning of more potential repercussions.
Mr. Yanukovych dashed Brussels’ hopes last week by refusing to sign the EU deal. That left the bloc to initial deals with the far smaller countries of Moldova and Georgia. European leaders were livid, taking the unusual step of releasing video of German Chancellor Angela Merkel candidly telling Mr. Yanukovych of her disappointment.

Secretary of State John Kerry had earlier drawn attention for his apparent snub of Kiev during a trip this week to Europe and the Middle East.

After Ukraine's decision to suspend plans for deeper ties to the EU became clear, the State Department announced Nov. 22 that Mr. Kerry wouldn't attend a meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, set to begin Thursday in Kiev, due to "scheduling issues."

However, Mr. Kerry will visit neighboring Moldova. State Department spokeswoman Jennifer Psaki said on Monday that Moldova had "put a number of reforms in place and they're working hard on their economy and the secretary felt it was important to highlight that."

In Ukraine, weeks of Russian threats had only spurred supporters of closer ties to Europe. After police brutally dispersed protesters Saturday, they reassembled in even greater numbers, demanding the government's ouster more clearly.

The confrontation appeared to reach a stalemate Monday, with crowds thinner than the day before dug in on Kiev's Independence Square. But legislators said a no-confidence vote scheduled for Tuesday seemed set to fail.

"It has all the signs of a coup," Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov told Western ambassadors on Monday. "It is a very serious matter. We are showing patience."

Opposition leaders spent much of a two-hour meeting with the ambassadors trying to disassociate themselves from any violence during the protests, people who attended the meeting said.

The U.S. and EU released statements Sunday calling for free speech and the right to assemble to be respected, while also condemning violence and the opposition's seizure on Sunday of two buildings.

That contrasts with their endorsement of the Orange Revolution in 2004, when weekslong demonstrations prevented Mr. Yanukovych from claiming victory after a fraud-tainted presidential election. A pro-Western government then came to power in defiance of Russia.

At that time, Mr. Yanukovych backed a crackdown, but then-President Leonid Kuchma refused, according to former officials.

"In 2004, the West and the opposition was ready. They knew what they wanted and how to achieve it," a leading opposition figure said. "This time Putin was ready and the West and we weren't."

On Monday, around 1,000 demonstrators blockaded the government headquarters, preventing people from getting to work. Government employees were working remotely, a spokesman said.

Nearby in Independence Square, several thousand people listened to speeches by opposition leaders, singing the national anthem and shouting, "Glory to Ukraine!" Many protesters wore the blue and yellow colors of Ukraine and the EU, while the most prominent political flags were from the ultranationalist Svoboda party and other radicals.

"If the president fails to fire the government, we'll hold him personally responsible," for the weekend violence, opposition leader Arseny Yatsenyuk told reporters inside a trade-union building that protesters have taken over.

By nighttime, thousands were still gathered on the square for a second night, manning barricades thrown...
together from metal fences, wooden benches and parts of a large Christmas tree. Many protesters from provincial towns were looking for shelter as the temperature dropped below freezing.

Some installed themselves in the two occupied buildings, wrapping themselves up in donated blankets. A couple dozen others slept on the floor of the centuries-old Mikhailivsky Monastery, a few hundred feet from Independence Square.

—Laurence Norman in Brussels contributed to this article.

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