

Yanukovich Proposes Joint EU-Customs Union-Ukraine Council

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Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich proposed Friday the creation of an advisory council with representatives from Ukraine, the European Union, and the Russia-led Customs Union, Itar-Tass reported.

Yanukovich's comments came on the heels of a meeting with President Vladimir Putin in Minsk on Thursday evening.

"We are mutually troubled regarding trade relations with Ukraine after the creation of a free trade zone with the EU," Yanukovich said. "Therefore we have proposed forming a standing advisory body with Ukraine, the EU and the Customs Union."

"We count on support for this initiative," he said, adding that the European Commission has no objections to Ukraine and the Customs Union seeking to overcome obstacles in their trade relations.

Putin and Yanukovych discussed the issue of Ukraine's EU integration at a closed meeting late Thursday evening, Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, told Interfax on Friday.

“That theme was touched upon, in keeping with Putin's answer to a journalist's question at the press conference,” Peskov said, referencing an event at the EurAsian Economic Community Summit in Minsk on Thursday.

“We are basically neither for nor against Ukraine signing an agreement for association with the EU. It is not our affair,” Putin said at the press conference.

Then asked if Ukraine could join the Russian-led Customs Union after signing such an agreement, Putin said, “No, it is impossible.”

Putin also discussed the topic of Uralkali with Belarussian leader Alexander Lukashenko during the summit. The Russian potash company's chief executive has been under arrest in Minsk since August.

Russia will cancel oil export duties to Belarus if Minsk removes all tariffs to conform to the requirements of the Moscow-led Customs Union, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov said Friday.

“The position of the Belarussians is ‘we are ready to sign without the special tariffs.’ That means our export duties with them will not be used,” Shuvalov said in Minsk, RIA Novosti reported.

Putin said Thursday at a Belarus summit bringing together heads of state of former Soviet nations that Moscow was prepared to scrap oil export duties for all members of the Customs Union, despite the loss of revenue that this would entail for the country's budget. He said this could be done if other bloc members removed customs tariffs on Russian goods.

Russia's oil export duties could be gone by 2015, according to Shuvalov. Lukashenko has said that Belarus could remove all remaining tariffs on Russian goods by 2014.

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