

Ukraine's Yanukovich Returns to Work, Street Protests Go On

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Riot police officers cordoning off the area near a barricade leading to Kiev's Independence Square on Monday. **Emilio Morenatti**

KIEV — Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich returned to his desk on Monday after four days of sick leave, while the political opposition pressed for further concessions to end more than two months of street protests.

"He is back at work," a presidential spokesman said.

Yanukovich, caught in a tug of war between Russia and the West, is seeking a way out of a sometimes violent confrontation with protesters who have occupied city streets and public buildings following his decision in November to spurn a trade deal with the European Union and accept financial aid from Moscow.

His first urgent task, after returning from an absence that some saw as a tactical gambit

to gain time, is to name a new prime minister to succeed Mykola Azarov, who stepped down on Jan. 28 under pressure from the protest movement.

The speaker of parliament, an ally of Yanukovich, told lawmakers on Monday ahead of a new session of the legislature starting Tuesday that the president was still planning to discuss the choice of premier with opposition leaders. "He is preparing these proposals this week," Volodymyr Rybak said. "So far, no nomination papers have been sent to parliament."

In other concessions, Yanukovich last week approved the repeal of recent anti-protest laws and offered a conditional amnesty to activists who have been detained in the unrest.

But opposition leaders, who have received huge backing and promises of financial support from the U.S. and EU governments, were pressing on Monday for further concessions.

The opposition wants a broader amnesty to free all those detained and a return to an earlier constitution, which would curb Yanukovich's presidential powers and give greater control to parliament over the formation of governments.

Also on Tuesday, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton is due to visit Kiev. She has said the EU and U.S. are preparing a package of economic support that would be available to Ukraine if it embarks on a transition to a new political system and new elections.

Russian Money

Such support would be needed if Russia froze a \$15-billion package it offered Yanukovich after he refused to sign the deal with the EU. Having lent \$3 billion so far, Moscow suspended a further tranche of \$2 billion, saying it first wants to see which new government Yanukovich appoints.

In a worrying development for Ukrainians in the grip of an Arctic winter, energy firm Naftogas said it might not be able to pay Gazprom for Russian gas imports on which the former Soviet republic relies.

Easier terms for energy after years of "gas wars" with Kiev were part of Moscow's support package agreed two months ago.

Russia, which had threatened Ukraine with ruinous trade sanctions if it signed up to last year's EU pact, has been concerned to maintain its influence over the country of 45 million. It accused Western-backed opposition leaders on Monday of provoking unrest by calling for "volunteer militias."

Anti-government militants have clashed with police and six people have been killed in violence in the past two weeks.

"We expect the opposition in Ukraine to avoid threats and ultimatums and join in dialogue with the authorities in order to finding a constitutional way out of the country's deep crisis," the Russian foreign ministry said in a statement.

With relations between the West and President Vladimir Putin's Kremlin already strained over a variety of issues, the fate of Ukraine, the biggest state lying between Europe and Russia, has

raised fears of broader instability across the continent if the standoff in Kiev should spiral out of control.

Tensions between Ukraine's Russian-speaking east and Ukrainian-speaking west are evident in small groups on either side which draw on historical enmities for emotional appeal.

The anti-government camp in central Kiev is adorned with nationalist heroes who fought tsarist and Soviet control. On the other side, some present themselves as heirs to the Red Army, which drove Nazi occupiers from Ukraine in World War II.

Mainstream leaders play down the ethnic divide and say they want good relations with both Russia and the West.

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