

Ousted Ukrainian President Yanukovych Surprised by Putin's Silence

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Yanukovych and Putin at a news conference in 2012.

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Deposed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych on Friday held a news conference in the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don in which he said that he has not been ousted and expressed surprise at President Vladimir Putin's seemingly withdrawn approach to the crisis.

"Knowing the character of Vladimir Putin, I am astonished that he is still keeping quiet with such restraint," Yanukovych said.

Putin has been conspicuously silent on Yanukovych's removal, and it could be telling that the conference was held more than 1,000 kilometers from Moscow and that no high-level Russian officials were present.

Yanukovych seemed to be unsure of the status of his relationship with Putin at this point. He

said that he talked to Putin by telephone after he arrived in Russia, but did not know when a face-to-face meeting would take place.

He said that he left Ukraine because of a direct threat to his life and the lives of his family members, and that he intends to return to Ukraine as soon as their safety can be guaranteed. However, he has no plans to run in the presidential election called by the interim government for May 25, describing it as “illegal.”

“I did not run, I moved from Kiev to the city of Kharkiv,” he said. “During my move I was shot at by automatic weapons. The car that covered me was effectively shot at from all sides.” His journey took him to Donetsk and later Crimea before he eventually got to Russia with the help of “a patriotically-minded young officer.” He was then taken in by an “old friend.”

Yanukovich spent the majority of the news conference trying to paint a picture of a caring ruler unjustly deposed by what he continually referred to as a small band of radical nationalists and outright fascists who are occupying positions of power “through fear and terror.” He also placed the blame for the violence in Kiev on the West, accusing it of irresponsible politics and of encouraging the Maidan, the focal point of the street protest movement in Kiev.

Ukraine's Prosecutor General's Office said Friday in a statement that it will ask Russia to extradite Yanukovich, who has been placed on an international wanted list on charges of mass murder. More than 80 people died in Kiev last week in clashes between Euromaidan protesters and police, with live rounds being used on both sides.

Though Yanukovich admitted to being ashamed for “lacking the strength to maintain stability,” he did not take any responsibility for the killings. He said that he did not give orders for protesters to be shot and that the decision to arm the police with combat weapons was made purely in the interests of self-defense.

The police “stood there with no weapons. They were hit with molotov cocktails, they were shot at, some were killed ... they were innocent people and they suffered,” he said.

He initially dodged questions concerning his mansion, which was found abandoned last Saturday and featured a botanical garden, a petting zoo, and a replica pirate ship, and has since become a monument to the alleged corruption of his regime. In the end, he flat out denied that the property was his and said that the photos being shown were merely an attempt to discredit him.

When asked about the situation in Crimea, where armed men have blockaded two airports, Yanukovich said that “everything that is happening now in Crimea is a natural reaction to the gangster coup in Kiev,” though he said that Crimea should remain part of Ukraine and that he opposes outside military intervention.

“Any military action in this situation is unacceptable,” he said. “I am not planning to turn to Russia for military support. I believe Ukraine should remain united and undivided.”

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