



Stalemate in Ukraine

Anders Åslund says that the impasse between President Yanukovych and the opposition leaves the West little choice but to monitor the situation and threaten sanctions if human rights are violated.

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Steve Weisman: It's been nearly two months since Ukraine walked away from its negotiation with the European Union and turned down an association with the West in favor of an association with Russia under pressure from President Vladimir Putin. The situation, after a lot of protests, has evolved into an impasse. Anders Aslund, senior fellow at the Peterson Institute, is here with me, Steve Weisman, to provide an update. Anders, what is the nature of the confrontation now in the first week of January?

Anders Aslund: It has reached a stalemate and it's clear that the Yanukovych government is not giving in. It has not changed a single minister and it's also clear that the opposition is not giving in. The opposition has overwhelming support in the opinion polls and has been highly disciplined and not used violence, while the authorities try to use as much violence as they can get away with, which is fortunately not much.

My sense is that this stalemate is likely to last a long time, most probably until the presidential elections scheduled for March 2015.

Steve Weisman: Another two years, in other words.

Anders Aslund: Fifteen months.

Steve Weisman: Why did the opposition fail in its effort to at least force a cabinet shakeup or a resignation of the prime minister?

Anders Aslund: It appeared as if the opposition had the possibility of getting a majority on their side in the parliament, but they did not work hard enough on getting defectors during the few days before the regime managed to get its support together again.

Steve Weisman: I think you had earlier said that there might be another attempt at a vote of no confidence in 2014, maybe in February or March.

Anders Aslund: Yes. But the opposition does not have sufficient support now and it looks as if defections from the ruling party have stopped. And therefore, the possibility of ousting the government through a parliamentary vote does not look very likely now, but it could change.

Steve Weisman: How has the West and, in particular, the United States handled it? Various emissaries from the State Department have supported the protesters, and members of Congress have done the same. What further can the United States do? What sort of pressure can be applied by the United States?

Anders Aslund: Ukraine is not Russia, which means that Ukraine is much more open internationally. Ukraine can be influenced in so many different ways by the United States. And I think

that the rules of engagement should be pretty clear. First, it's a matter of being engaged in Ukraine. Second, to monitor that violence is not being used. And thirdly, to protest when violence is being used and so far, it has entirely been the authorities that have used violence in order to make the protestors look bad. It's important that the US and the EU are coordinating their actions, as they are doing very well.

Basically, I think that both the US and the EU are doing the right things now. The European Association Agreement is lying on the table. It can be signed any time by a new Ukrainian president. It's not a question of changing the agreement in one way or the other. It's just a matter of Ukraine having to fulfill elementary demands for rule of law and democracy.

The big question that the Senate resolution [calls for] is a personal sanction, as happened with Sergei Magnitsky act for Russian officials who have used violence. And, I think it's good that the issue is being raised. I hope that it will not be necessary to use it.

Steve Weisman: You mentioned that there was good cooperation between Washington and the European Union. Tell me more.

Anders Aslund: We are seeing now that both the US and the EU are protesting on flagrant human rights violations by the Ukrainian authorities. So they are acting very much in parallel.

Steve Weisman: At the same time, aren't their hands tied because although Yanukovich is objectionable, he was duly elected, so they can't favor the overthrow of Yanukovich?

Anders Aslund: Well, it's not a revolution situation as was the case in Georgia, that the opposition is so strong that it can oust sitting president. It seems as if the opposition has agreed that now both sides are just waiting for the March 2015 presidential elections.

Steve Weisman: What more do you expect Russia to be able to do for Ukraine? I mentioned earlier the Customs Union, but it's not clear that's ever going to happen.

Anders Aslund: I don't think that much will happen. Russia will provide some financing to Ukraine on pretty market-like terms, so this is not a charity at all. And Russia offers the short-term loans, which means that Russia can always get its money out of Ukraine. And essentially, the other measures Russia has undertaken is to abolish more or less illegal sanctions against Ukraine that should not have been there to begin with. So for Russia this is cheap.

Steve Weisman: Illegal sanctions, whose sanctions?

Anders Aslund: Russia has imposed a large number of trade sanctions against Ukraine which are against Russia's obligations to the World Trade Organization.

Steve Weisman: So they can just rescind those without much consequence.

Anders Aslund: They have done so now and they should never have been allowed to introduce them to begin with.

Steve Weisman: Anders, thank you very much.

Anders Aslund: Thank you.

