UKRAINIAN WORLD CONGRESS:
‘DON’T PUNISH UKRAINIANS, SIGN ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT’

While few expect the European Union-Ukraine summit next week to be a breakthrough in Brussels-Kyiv relations, it could very well set the course for the signing of a long-awaited association agreement in November when the two will meet at a European partnership summit in November.

In order for that to happen, however, Ukraine must show “swift and tangible progress” in three specific areas. That’s how European Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele put it at a press conference during a recent visit to Kyiv.

The former Soviet republic needs to demonstrate that it’s working to reform its electoral system, after problems arose during last autumn’s parliamentary elections, as well as its notoriously corrupt legal system. Ukraine needs also to make progress on the issue of political persecution, or what the EU has called “selective justice,” as it has repeatedly called for the freedom of imprisoned former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and her ex-Interior Minister Yuriy Lutsenko.

Among those who’ve said they expect a deal could be signed in November are Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, Fuele and the EU Foreign Affairs Council.

Another is Eugene Czolij, president of the Ukrainian World Congress, an international coordinating body for Ukrainian diaspora communities that says it represents the interest of more than 20 million Ukrainians, with member organizations in 33 countries and ties with others in 14 additional countries.

While his name hasn’t made many headlines regarding the EU-Ukraine association agreement, his nongovernmental organization has special consulting status, and is regarded as an influential voice for Ukraine’s European integration.

Czolij told the Kyiv Post during a Skype interview on Feb. 19 from his office in Montreal that he will be in Brussels on Feb. 25 for the summit, where he plans to encourage European leaders to expedite Ukraine’s European integration.

“We (the Ukrainian World Congress) will be asking the European leaders to accelerate that process, and to clearly, in the meantime, reiterate in no uncertain terms, that the EU is very much interested in Ukraine,” he said. “Of course we were hoping that (the association agreement) would actually be done in Brussels, but I think the more realistic target date would be in November.”
The best scenario in Brussels, Czolij said, would be for Ukrainian authorities to show that they are making strides toward compliance of the reforms that the EU is asking they address before signing the association agreement.

“The worst case scenario is for the Ukrainian authorities to keep promising to address various issues, raising the expectations of the EU leadership and then not following up. That creates frustration, because nobody likes to be told, in these types of negotiations, that certain things will be done and then see that the promises are being ignored,” he remarked.

A self-proclaimed optimist, Czolij said he’s confident Ukraine will take the necessary steps to sign the association agreement with the EU beginning in Brussels, during the two sides’ highest level bilateral talks that take place on a yearly basis.

**Action needed now**

But experts less optimistic than Czolij have warned Ukraine is moving too slowly, noting that failure to sign the agreement in November could set back Ukraine’s integration for months or even years, as the political momentum might not transfer over to a new European Commission.

Pawel Kowal, a member of the European Parliament, stressed exactly that at a press conference in Kyiv last week.

“If (Ukraine) fails to sign the association agreement during this year, I am afraid the signing of the document may be impossible under the next membership of the (European Commission), and interest in Ukraine will decline,” Kowal said.

Several politicians and experts have sounded off in recent weeks, expressing their hopes for the deal to go through during the November Vilnius summit.

Perhaps the biggest beneficial outcome of signing the agreement would be the development of a deep and comprehensive free trade area, which would provide further economic integration with the EU’s internal market.

Still, challenges persist. Ukraine must first address the political demands of the European Union. Ukrainian authorities haven’t signaled that they’d be releasing the country’s political prisoners, and few significant steps have been taken thus far to reform its electoral and legal systems.

**An eastern alternative**

Some worry Ukraine will strengthen ties with its neighbor to the east if tangible progress isn’t made on European integration, which is why Czolij hopes it would still seriously consider penning the deal.

“(The Ukrainian World Congress) would say to (the European Union), distance and dissociate Ukraine and the Ukrainian people from Ukrainian authorities, and in addressing human rights violations, do not punish Ukraine, do not punish the Ukrainian people, but punish those who violate fundamental human rights and freedoms.”

Speaking about the Customs Union in Dublin last December, before meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters that the formation of the Customs Union "is a move to re-Sovietize the region."

Russia was quick to rebuff Clinton’s statement and distance itself from the idea of a new Soviet Union being formed.
“What we see on the territory of the ex-Soviet Union is a new type of integration, based solely on economic integration,” said Dmitry Peskov, a spokesperson for President Putin. "Any other integration is totally impossible in this world."

Putin himself has said that there is no talk of restoring the USSR in any form.

Still many, including Czolij, worry.

“President Putin was quoted saying that the collapse of the Soviet Union was ‘the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century,’” he said. “So how can we believe that (the Customs Union) won’t be a new Soviet Union?”

Options on the table

“Ukraine has three options,” Czolij told the Kyiv Post. “One option is the status quo, to continue where (Ukraine is) at, in no man’s land, where on the one side it’s being pulled by Russia and the other from the EU.”

Another option – and the worst-case scenario, according to Czolij – is to join the Customs Union, a move that the EU has said would take an association agreement with it off the table.

“I think Ukrainians have seen what the Soviet Union is all about. I don’t think they would want to go back to it. I think that they’ve experienced harsh religious, political and cultural persecution. They’ve experienced the Holodomor (manmade famine) of 1932-33. A Customs Union membership would essentially be to go to some new form of Soviet Union.”

On the other hand, “European integration will allow Ukrainians to live in harmony with a European community that shares its values and democratic principles,” he said. “It will give Ukrainians access to the largest economy in the world. It will allow Ukrainians to obtain assistance in the energy sector for its modernization… accelerate educational and health system reforms, aligning them with European standards. It will allow them to move freely through the EU countries. And it will ultimately establish a more balanced relationship with Russia.”

Whatever Ukraine decides, and however it chooses to proceed, at least one of these options might soon be off the table.

“We can’t wait – the window of opportunity is now,” Fuele told reporters in Kyiv earlier this month following his meeting with Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov. “Timing matters in politics.”

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