

John McCain in Kiev: 'Ukraine will make Europe better'

John McCain, the American senator, has told protesters in the Ukrainian capital Kiev that their country's destiny lies with Europe - despite an EU official saying talks with the EU were 'on hold'



John McCain speaks during a pro-European rally on the Independence Square in Kiev, Ukraine Photo: EPA/TATYANA ZENKOVICH

By Harriet Alexander, and Christopher Miller in Kiev

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The European Union suspended all negotiations with Ukraine on Sunday over a historic trade pact, as 200,000 converged on the main square in Kiev to demand the government align itself to Europe rather than Russia.

The EU's surprise announcement came despite the large numbers that converged on Kiev's snowy streets aiming to put pressure on President Viktor Yanukovich.

“Words and deeds of president and government regarding Association Agreement further and further apart,” tweeted Stefan Fuele, EU enlargement commissioner. “Their arguments have no grounds in reality.”

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Mr Fuele said that EU officials had told Ukraine that further discussions required a “clear commitment to sign.”

But that not being forthcoming, he said: “Work on hold, had no answer.”

The opposition to the government says that union with Russia would effectively reconstitute the Soviet Union. They remain suspicious that Mr Yanukovich intends to agree to the customs union when he meets Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday.

The diplomatic tug of war and conflicting statements worked only to invigorate the spirits of 200,000 protesters, however, who have been rallying daily for over three weeks.

“We are here to join the revolution,” said Lyudmila Kostyantynivna, a pensioner from the city of Cherkasy, three hours south of Kiev. Dancing at the front of the crowd near the soundstage while a musical act performed, she said she had been following coverage of the protests on the few television channels showing it for the past weeks, but decided to come out this weekend after encouragement from her friends, who were with her.

“It is not only for young people, but us, too,” she said. “We have a criminal for a president, and a government that takes, takes, takes, and leaves us – the people – with nothing.”

By noon, Kiev’s Independence Square teemed with people from as far as the western Ukrainian city of Lvov and the eastern industrial city of Luhansk. They poured out from the metro exits and spilt onto the city’s main boulevard, Khreschatyk, chanting: “Out with the gang!” and “Glory to Ukraine!”

Led by opposition leaders, the crowd, waving EU and Ukrainian flags, sang the country’s anthem.

Igor Rudenko, a 25-year-old businessman, said he wanted the government to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, and not seek closer ties with Russia.

“We had a very unstable political and economic situation, made worse by not signing the association agreement,” he said. “So I am out here to demand that our country is taken to the EU.”

“The EU’s influence can make our country better, more confident and more competitive in the world economy.”

His words were echoed by John McCain, the American senator, who arrived in Kiev on Saturday to support the anti-government protesters.

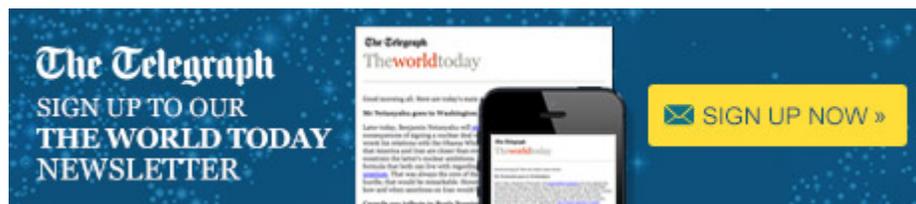
“To all Ukraine, America stands with you,” he called out to the cheering crowd in Independence Square.

“The free world is with you, America is with you, I am with you. Ukraine will make Europe better and Europe will make Ukraine better.”

A much smaller rally of government supporters, numbering around 15,000 people, was taking place about a mile away at Kiev's Mariinsky Park. Dozens of police in riot gear separated the two groups.

And despite Mr Fuele’s comments, the protesters were given a glimmer of hope by Carl Bildt, Sweden’s foreign minister and a strong proponent of Ukraine’s integration.

“The door is wide open for Ukraine to sign association and free trade agreement with EU,” he tweeted. “It’s ready. Any time.”



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