

## EU to test Yanukovich on democracy

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**Viktor Yanukovich**, president of Ukraine, will seek to allay growing concerns in the west that his regime is backsliding on democracy as he travels to Brussels on Monday for his first summit with the European Union since taking office.

The two sides will try to make progress on a host of initiatives, including a trade agreement they hope to conclude next year and a plan to eliminate travel visas, a concession that Ukraine is eager to clinch.

Yet those issues will be overshadowed by talk of Ukraine's commitment to democracy and a free media. Critics say it has faltered under Mr Yanukovich, who has sought closer ties to the Kremlin.

The US and EU both criticised **local elections held last month** after independent observers reported numerous procedural violations. A spokesperson for Lady Ashton, the EU foreign policy chief, said the contest undermined confidence in Ukraine's democracy.

Speaking before the talks, Ukrainian officials said Mr Yanukovich would reaffirm his dedication to keeping Kiev on a path towards EU membership while also improving ties with Russia.

Kostiantyn Yelisieiev, Ukraine's ambassador to the EU, argued on Friday that all countries experienced electoral irregularities and that the government was committed to doing a better job in future. He also sought to allay concerns that Ukraine was drifting back towards Moscow.

"We will clearly show to the EU that the stabilisation of relations between Ukraine and Russia is only for the good in relations between the EU and Ukraine," Mr Yelisieiev said. "We will clearly say, 'Please do not consider the normalisation of relations with Russia as going back to the east'."

Opposition parties and small-business owners plan to stage a mass protest in Kiev on Monday, which is also the sixth anniversary of the Orange Revolution that overturned a presidential vote rigged in Mr Yanukovich's favour.

Invigorating Ukraine's opposition, tens of thousands of protesters representing small businesses took to the streets of Kiev and other cities last week to protest against **tax reforms** adopted by Mr Yanukovich's coalition. They allege the legislation unfairly burdens small businesses, while cutting tax rates for big businesses.

"We ask you to convince President Yanukovich to veto this tax code," small business owners said in an open letter to the EU. "Defending their own money from taxation by sending it into offshore accounts, the ruling oligarchs are placing the fiscal burden on small and medium-sized businesses."

In another open letter, a coalition of Ukrainian non-governmental organisations urged the EU to protect democracy in Ukraine by taking a harder stance on Mr Yanukovich's administration, which has also been accused of persecuting opposition parties.

Several **allies of his rival Yulia Tymoshenko**, the former premier, were jailed this summer in connection with investigations that the opposition claims were politically motivated. Sources said another ally of Ms Tymoshenko, Bohdan Danylyshyn, a former economy minister, recently appealed to Czech authorities for political asylum.

Ms Tymoshenko, a leader of the Orange Revolution leader, urged the EU to help defend democracy.

"It's symbolically important that this summit occurs on the anniversary of the Orange Revolution. Ukraine's democracy is at risk again," she told the Financial Times.

Experts say EU officials face a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, they will stress that further engagement hangs on Kiev's democratic credentials.

On the other, EU officials will encourage engagement in trade and energy, fearing that isolation could push Mr Yanukovich closer to Russia. It is a fear that opposition figures say Mr Yanukovich is eager to exploit for his personal political gain.

Tomas Valasek, director of foreign policy and defence at London's Centre for European Reform, said that under Mr Yanukovich Ukraine is "turning inwards and becoming increasingly authoritarian".

"The EU should discourage Mr Yanukovich from building a one-party system, while supporting economic and energy reforms," he added.

Ms Tymoshenko said "conditions need to be applied to bilateral agreements" requiring Ukraine to uphold democracy. "Europe's voice needs to be heard loudly and clearly."

Ms Tymoshenko also took aim at the Party of European Socialists, which inked a co-operation agreement this autumn with Mr Yanukovich's big business-backed Party of Regions. She accused Europe's socialist parties of betraying EU principles in blocking a European Parliament resolution critical of last month's local elections.

"The Party of Regions ... has found an unusual ally in the Socialist group in the European parliament, which has twice postponed a resolution criticising Ukraine's democratic regression," Ms Tymoshenko said.

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