

Political row intensifies ^{19/9}

KIEV (UKRAINE): The Ukrainian President, Leonid Kuchma (*in the picture*), has refused to meet Opposition representatives demanding his resignation, intensifying the growing political conflict, an Opposition leader said on Wednesday. Tens of thousands of protesters marched through Ukraine on Monday to demand Mr. Kuchma resign, prompting early elections. The leader of the Opposition Sobor party, Anatoliy Matvienko, requested a meeting with Mr. Kuchma to hand him the Opposition's resolution and discuss the demands. Mr. Kuchma's chief of staff, Viktor Medvedchuk, said the resolution was 'offensive' and that Mr. Kuchma would not discuss it with anyone, according to Mr. Matvienko, who said he spoke with Mr. Medvedchuk by telephone. However, Mr. Medvedchuk said later on Wednesday that Mr. Kuchma was prepared to talk with the Opposition, but only for a civilised exchange of opinions. Mr. Matvienko criticised Mr. Kuchma's refusal to meet him. "If he is Ukraine's President, his duties, not sympathies should guide him in his actions." Mr. Kuchma is currently accompanying the Romanian President, Ion Iliescu, in the southern port city of Odessa and is expected to return on Thursday. The refusal was likely to strengthen the tension between authorities and Opposition politicians, who accuse pro-Kuchma forces of fraud in recent parliamentary elections. — AP





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Kiev protest turns violent ^{H0-12}

KIEV (UKRAINE): Several thousand riot police armed with shields and rubber truncheons destroyed a tent camp and evicted protesters near Ukraine's presidential office before dawn on Tuesday, following a Kiev march by tens of thousands of people who demanded the resignation of the President, Leonid Kuchma. Following the country's biggest demonstrations since Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union 11 years ago, supporters of Opposition groups from Communists to democrats set up 167 tents under a heavy rain late Monday. They vowed to occupy the area around Mr. Kuchma's office until he steps down. The Opposition leader and former Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Tymoshenko (*in the picture, being shielded by supporters from riot police*) said on Tuesday that 5,000 riot police took part in dismantling the tent camp and beat some 1,500 people guarding the tents. They were poised to use tear gas to disperse the crowd but protesters managed to seize the tear gas tanks in a clash with police at about 4 a.m. (0100 GMT), she said. "They started to beat people left and right, peaceful people who were tired and half asleep," Ms. Tymoshenko said. — AP



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Ties with CIS top priority, says Putin

By Vladimir Radyuhin

MOSCOW, APRIL 18. The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, outlined a strictly pragmatic foreign policy agenda for his country that forfeits global ambitions and emphasises relations with the former Soviet States and Europe as Russia's main economic partners.

The post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is "Russia's topmost foreign policy priority, which is connected, among other things, with winning competitive advantages in global markets," Mr. Putin stated in his annual state

of the nation address to both Houses of Parliament on Thursday. The Russian leader also "strongly" emphasised relations with Europe as Russia's No 2 foreign policy priority. "We will continue to work with the European Union with the aim of forming a united economic space with it," he said. Russia's third priority is "to ensure global strategic stability, for which purpose we are participating in the establishment of a new security system, are maintaining a constant dialogue with the United States and are working to change the quality of our relations with NATO."

Recalling Russia's role in destroying a hotbed of international terrorism in Afghanistan as an example of pragmatic policy that "helped strengthen security on Russia's southern borders," Mr. Putin vowed to continue "a strictly pragmatic foreign policy compatible with our possibilities, based on our strategic, economic and political interests and taking account of the interests of our partners, above all, in the CIS."

The Russian President called on the Government to aim at much higher growth rates to enable Russia "to win a place in the economic sun" in a highly

competitive world. "For Russia to become a fully-fledged member of the world community and a tough competitor, the economy must grow at a much faster rate," he said. "Otherwise we will lose out and our possibilities in world politics and the economy will shrink further." Russia's economic growth slowed to five per cent in 2001, after hitting a record nine per cent in 2000, and is set to further decline to around four per cent this year. This is barely enough to keep Russia from falling further behind the West, Mr. Putin said, but is too slow to narrow the gap.