

Tymoshenko Will Go on Trial

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Tymoshenko attending a pre-trial hearing in a Kiev court on Saturday. **Sergei Chuzavkov**

KIEV — Former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko must stand trial next Wednesday on a charge of abuse of power, a judge ruled in a pre-trial hearing late Saturday.

The charge carries a jail term of at least seven years.

Judge Rodion Kyriyev threw out objections by Tymoshenko and her defense that the charge against her was politically motivated and that President Viktor Yanukovich was behind it.

Earlier, the 50-year-old political firebrand had continued to argue that the accusation against her, which relates to the signing of a 2009 gas deal with Russia when she was in power, was part of a wider political plot.

"The aim of this trial is the liquidation of a working opposition in Ukraine," she said, before Kyriyev handed down his ruling.

"Consideration of the case is set for June 29 at 10 a.m.," Kyriyev declared after emerging from deliberations in Kiev's Pechersk District Court.

Tymoshenko, twice prime minister and now in opposition, has claimed that Yanukovych, her bitter political foe, was the instigator of a crooked legal case that was certain to convict her.

The gas supply agreement ended a standoff with Russia over the pricing of Russian gas that had led to supplies being cut off to Western Europe. It has since been denounced by the Yanukovych leadership as a sellout, although Kiev is continuing to observe it.

The prosecution says that Tymoshenko, without consulting her government, forced the then-head of state energy firm Naftogaz to sign the gas deal with Gazprom. She denies this.

"I did not break the law, so where is the basis for the seven to 10 years sentence that our 'bought' state prosecutor wants pronounced against me?" she asked Saturday before the judge made his ruling.

While a few hundred of her supporters braved torrential rain on the streets of Kiev to express their solidarity, Tymoshenko used her oratory in the courtroom to berate Kyriyev, whom she denounced on Friday as a Yanukovych "puppet."

Refusing to stand to address the court, she told Kyriyev: "Since this is an ordered operation by the president, I will permit myself to act toward the court as it does toward me. When the court becomes honorable, only then will I address you as 'Your Honor.'"

She also asked for other accusations against her, including misuse of government funds received in exchange of emission quotas sold to Japan under the Kyoto Protocol, to be heard by the court.

The United States and the European Union have condemned the cases against Tymoshenko and a number of her top allies as selective prosecution of political opponents.

"When the senior leadership of an opposition party is the focus of prosecutions out of proportion with other political figures, this does create the appearance of a political motive," U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said.

Jose Manuel Pinton Teixeira, the EU's ambassador to Ukraine, who attended a chaotic first hearing Friday in the small and stiflingly hot courtroom together with a group of other foreign diplomats, said the conditions in the courtroom were horrendous. "I cannot give a political assessment of this case, but the conditions of this trial are inhumane," Teixeira told reporters as he headed out.

Confusion had reigned in the cramped, poorly air-conditioned courtroom. Tymoshenko's supporters continuously disrupted the proceedings, ignoring the judge's demand to respect the court. They shouted "Shame, shame!" through a loudspeaker and insulted the court and authorities, including calling one of the prosecutors a witch. One supporter used water to twice douse a pro-government lawmaker, a fierce opponent of Tymoshenko who came to support the prosecution, then insisted it was an accident. Tymoshenko's supporters also scuffled briefly with a small group of Tymoshenko's opponents who were forced out of the room.

More than 100 journalists, supporters and opponents packed the courtroom. Most attendees had to climb on top of narrow wooden benches to see and hear the proceedings and took turns

standing near a window for fresh air. Sweat dripped from Judge Kiriye's face, and his hair was wet.

Tymoshenko's lawyer, Serhiy Vlasov, pleaded with the court for a short break to change into a new shirt because his was soaking wet. A young woman in the courtroom briefly fainted and was escorted out.

(Reuters, AP)

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