

Kiev Judge Refuses to Free Tymoshenko

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Riot police running beside a police vehicle thought to be taking Tymoshenko back to prison from court Monday. **Efrem Lukatsky**

KIEV — A Ukrainian judge on Monday rejected requests by former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's lawyers to free her from police detention during her trial on a charge of abuse of office.

Ukrainian special forces clashed with her supporters outside the courtroom on Kiev's main thoroughfare after the trial judge rejected for a third time pleas by her lawyers for her to be freed from police custody.

The charismatic 50-year-old politician has repeatedly refused to cooperate with judge Rodion Kireyev since her trial opened at the end of June and has denounced him as a "puppet" of President Viktor Yanukovich. She was placed in police detention last Friday for contempt of court.

When the judge on Monday refused a third request to release her and fixed the next hearing for Wednesday, scores of her supporters poured out on to the thoroughfare, temporarily blocking traffic.

Scuffles broke out as Berkut special forces poured into the area to clear a path for a police van to drive Tymoshenko away. Scores of supporters stood by chanting “Yulia! Yulia!” derisively at riot police.

To avoid inflaming her supporters, police brought Tymoshenko to the Kiev courthouse in an armored police van early Monday morning, about four hours before the hearing began.

Tymoshenko had lost none of her fire for spending a weekend in prison. “You know that I am not guilty of anything. I will not stand up for you,” she told the judge when told to rise in court on Monday.

Tymoshenko’s supporters reacted sharply to news that she would continue to spend the night in police custody.

“We have exhausted all political mechanisms. From now on, our future action will be carried out on the square,” said Tymoshenko bloc lawmaker Serhiy Sobolev, meaning that street protests would continue.

“It doesn’t matter what the judge decides. We will keep on pressing for her release, as many times as it takes,” said Serhiy Vlashenko, another parliamentary ally.

Adding to European Union criticism of her detention, Washington said in a statement that the ruling reinforced the impression that Tymoshenko’s trial was politically motivated.

Despite Western criticism, it does not seem likely to endanger financial aid from the International Monetary Fund, which is strictly linked to economic reform including raising gas prices.

But it could slow talks between the EU and Ukraine aimed at strengthening bilateral ties with the eventual goal of forming a free trade zone.

The abuse of office charge against her relates to the signing of a gas supply contract with Russia in 2009 while she was prime minister.

She denies that she coerced state energy company Naftogaz into agreeing to a deal with Gazprom that was ultimately against the national interest.

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