

7 Years in Jail Sought for Tymoshenko

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Ukrainian police officers blocking Tymoshenko supporters Tuesday outside the Pechersky District Court in Kiev. **Sergei Chuzavkov**

KIEV — The state prosecutor in former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko's trial called for a seven-year jail sentence for the politician on Tuesday.

Tymoshenko, 50, one of Ukraine's most prominent opposition politicians, is charged with abuse of office regarding a gas deal signed with Russia in January 2009 that the administration of President Viktor Yanukovich says saddled Ukraine with an exorbitant price for gas. She denies this.

After hearing prosecutor Lilia Frolova request the sentence, Tymoshenko replied to the court: "This is a continuation of political repression, and I am convinced that they are doing this on the orders of President Yanukovich."

"At the rate the trial is going, it may be over by Thursday," said defense counsel Yuri Sukhov.

The Yanukovich leadership says her action in pressuring the state energy firm Naftotgaz into signing an agreement with the Russian gas giant Gazprom in 2009 endangered the national

interest.

The United States and the European Union say the trial is politically motivated, and they have urged Yanukovych to find a way of ending the case against her.

Judge Rodion Kireyev placed Tymoshenko in police detention on Aug. 5 for "systematically" disrupting court proceedings and has refused several pleas by her defense for her to be released from custody during the trial.

The trial has polarized public opinion in the country and caused street demonstrations against Yanukovych. It was adjourned on Sept. 12 until Tuesday, after the United States and the EU expressed concern over her prosecution.

Since then, the EU has hardened its position further, warning Yanukovych that it could scrap planned bilateral deals on free trade and political association if Tymoshenko is jailed.

Riot police moved back into place in side streets near the courtroom in downtown Kiev on Tuesday in preparation for the resumption of the trial. Hundreds of Tymoshenko supporters camped outside the courtroom throughout the summer in solidarity with her.

Wearing her trademark peasant-style hair braid, she waved and blew kisses to her supporters in court. "This absurd show needs to be ended," she defiantly told journalists during a recess in proceedings.

Referring to Yanukovych, whom she accuses of conducting a vendetta against her, she said: "I want to remind Yanukovych — wherever I am, in jail or at liberty, I feel like a free person."

Tymoshenko's supporters say Yanukovych ordered the trial to neutralize her as a political opponent ahead of parliamentary elections in October next year.

But many commentators say it has turned into a public relations disaster for him, bringing not only criticism from the West but also from Russia, with which Yanukovych's government is trying to negotiate a new price for gas.

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