

Ukraine Calls Strategic Pause in Tymoshenko Trial

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A Tymoshenko supporter making a heart-shaped gesture outside Kiev's Pechora District Court on Friday.
Vladimir Sindeyev

KIEV — The trial of former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko was adjourned on Friday for 11 days to give the political leadership time to ponder its next move in the face of fierce criticism from the West.

Judge Rodion Kireyev said the trial of the 50-year-old opposition leader would be paused until Oct. 11 at the earliest, and was expected to announce his verdict soon after it resumed.

State prosecutors have asked for a seven-year jail sentence to be passed on the charismatic politician who they allege exceeded her powers as prime minister by forcing through a 2009 gas deal with Russia to the detriment of Ukraine.

She denies this and says the trial is a vendetta against her by President Viktor Yanukovich.

Kireyev gave no specific reason for the adjournment. He said the court would reconvene again

"around" Oct. 11.

But political commentators said it was clearly designed to give Yanukovych and his ruling circle breathing space in which to consider their options following pressure from the European Union and the United States over the case.

The EU, with which Ukraine is negotiating important agreements on association and free trade, has said these will be jeopardized if Tymoshenko is jailed.

It has urged Yanukovych to push through amendments to the criminal law to reclassify the charge against Tymoshenko to allow her to go free and continue as an opposition politician.

"Yanukovych needs these two weeks to make a decision. He is in a difficult situation in that the prosecutor has asked for a seven-year jail sentence on Tymoshenko," said political analyst Viktor Nebozhenko.

EU officials again spelled out the tough message to Yanukovych on Friday at an Eastern Partnership summit in Poland.

"We have expressed ourselves very clearly to the authorities of Ukraine that the whole EU, and each of us separately, believe the bad treatment of the democratic opposition and the violation of democratic standards ... may overshadow the final stage of the negotiations" on association agreement, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk told a Warsaw news conference.

"We expressed our concern about the fate of the former prime minister, and we expressed our rejection of a possible selective use of criminal judicial measures against former government members," said European Council President Herman van Rompuy.

In comments to the court before the adjournment, Tymoshenko, who spoke for four hours on Thursday, said: "The sentence that Kireyev will announce will testify to whether Yanukovych wants European integration for Ukraine."

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