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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

‘Unremorseful’ Tymoshenko Gets 7 Years in Prison

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Kireyev reading his ruling Tuesday. **Efrem Lukatsky**

A Ukrainian judge handed down the maximum seven-year sentence to former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko on Tuesday, saying he had not found any "extenuating circumstances" to reduce the prison term nor any signs of remorse from Tymoshenko.

Flanked by her daughter, Yevhenia, and her husband, Oleksander, Tymoshenko smiled faintly as the sentence was passed.

But defiant to the last, she rose to her feet — studiously ignoring the judge who was still delivering the final sentences of his judgment — and denounced President Viktor Yanukovych's "authoritarian regime" and the absence of justice in Ukraine.

She was quickly driven away in a police van after officers carved a cordon through thousands of her supporters outside the courtroom.

The Tymoshenko affair seems certain to slow Yanukovych's drive for European integration,

a declared foreign policy priority for the president.

In Brussels, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said the trial smacked of "selective" justice.

"The EU will reflect on its policies towards Ukraine," she said in a statement on behalf of the EU, an apparent allusion to a planned association agreement that would entail a Ukrainian-EU free-trade zone.

Tymoshenko's supporters say the trial outcome reflected Yanukovych's plans to eliminate her as the only real opposition to him. If she ends up serving a long prison term, she will be unable to contest parliamentary elections next year or run again for president in 2015.

EU diplomats had urged Yanukovych to use his powers to "decriminalize" the charge against her — reclassifying it as an administrative rather than a criminal offense — to allow her to go free.

Yanukovych himself appeared to signal Tuesday that Tymoshenko's case was not over yet and hinted that new legislation, adopted by the time the case is heard by an appeals court, could be of great importance.

"It goes without saying that the decision [the court] will make and within what legislative framework it will make its decision — this will have great significance," he said, Interfax reported.

Some analysts believe that Tuesday's decision could still be reversed.

"A compromise is still possible," said political analyst Oleksiy Haran. "She gets the guilty verdict, and Yanukovych's sense of revenge is satisfied. But then she is released and allowed to stand in elections."

Judge Rodion Kireyev declared Tymoshenko, 50, guilty of exceeding her authority as prime minister when she signed a natural gas imports contract with Russia in 2009. He also banned her from occupying government posts for three years after the completion of her prison term and fined her 1.5 billion hryvna ($190 million) for the damages her actions cost the state.

Tymoshenko, clad in a beige dress and wearing her trademark blond braid around her head, appeared unfazed by the verdict and began addressing reporters in the courtroom without waiting for Kireyev to finish reading the lengthy ruling.

She said Yanukovych wrote the verdict himself and compared it to the show trials and horrific purges by Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

"The year 1937 has returned to Ukraine with this verdict and all the repression of citizens," she said. "As for me, be sure that I will not stop my fight even for a minute. I will always be with you as long as it is necessary.

"Nobody, not Yanukovych, not Kireyev, can humiliate my honest name. I have worked and will continue to work for Ukraine's sake," Tymoshenko told reporters earlier.

As Kireyev was leaving the courtroom, Tymoshenko's husband, Oleksandr, yelled out that the judge would someday get a similar verdict. One Tymoshenko supporter shouted "Shame!"

Tymoshenko said she would contest the ruling in the European Court of Human Rights, and her lawyers said they would appeal the verdict in local courts.

Amnesty International denounced Tymoshenko's conviction as "illegitimate," saying her trial "casts doubt over the independence of the judiciary."

The trial, which most commentators agree has been a public relations disaster for Yanukovych, has now complicated relations with Ukraine's two main trading partners, the EU and Russia.

EU officials have warned Ukraine that planned bilateral deals on political association and free trade may never be ratified by EU states if Tymoshenko ends up in jail or is barred from running for office.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kostyantyn Gryshchenko told reporters in Brussels that it was important to respect the judicial system, saying Tymoshenko had "brazenly showed disrespect for the court."

Asked how the government was going to deal with the political fallout, he replied: "The government is not in a position to do anything before the court proceedings are done."

Gryshchenko was in Brussels for an exchange of views with the foreign affairs committee of the European Parliament.

Tymoshenko helped lead the 2004 mass street protests against Yanukovych's election victory that year. Those demonstrations drew hundreds of thousands to Kiev's central Independence Square, setting the stage for the Supreme Court to overturn Yanukovych's victory and call for a revote, which Tymoshenko's ally, Viktor Yushchenko, won by a narrow margin.

Yanukovych staged a comeback, narrowly defeating Tymoshenko in a 2010 presidential vote amid the public disenchantment.

Tymoshenko has been in jail for more than two months on charges of contempt of court. She spent several weeks in prison in 2001 on charges of document forgery and tax evasion, but the charges were later dropped.

(Reuters, AP, MT)

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