

EU-Ukraine Pact Finalized, Stalled

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KIEV — A summit intended to bring Ukraine into Europe's mainstream foundered on Monday after the EU said it would not sign a landmark political and trade deal until Kiev resolves the case of jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko.

Negotiations were finished on the agreement, which would create a free-trade zone and establish deeper ties, but European Council President Herman Van Rompuy said signing and ratifying it "will depend on political circumstances."

"Our strong concern is primarily related to the risks of politically motivated justice in Ukraine. The Tymoshenko trial is the most striking example," he told President Viktor Yanukovich.

The summit, four years in preparation, was intended to mark the start of a new strategic relationship between the EU and Ukraine, which has made integration into the European mainstream a priority while managing strong ties with Russia.

But during two hours of face-to-face talks with Yanukovich, Van Rompuy and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso appeared to have made little headway in persuading him to relent and bring about the release of Tymoshenko and other opponents.

Despite the setback, Yanukovych said Ukraine was still committed to European integration.

"The Association Agreement will be a key moment for the Euro-integrationist course of our state," he told the EU leaders.

With 45 million people, Ukraine is the most populous former Soviet republic apart from Russia itself, and building a closer relationship is an important strategic goal for Brussels. The stalling of the pact is a setback for some Ukrainian businesses, which covet access to Western Europe's markets and investment.

Ukraine is also the main transit route for Russian natural gas into the EU, which relies on Moscow's energy resources.

Yanukovych said strengthening Europe's energy security remained an important part of Ukraine's cooperation with the EU and it would continue to modernize its gas transport system with the support of the EU and its financial institutions.

But efforts to bring Kiev closer to the European mainstream have been stalled since the sentencing of Tymoshenko in October.

An implacable foe of Yanukovych, she was sentenced to seven years in jail for abuse of office while she was prime minister. She called her trial a "lynching" by her adversary.

The EU says her trial raises questions over the democratic credentials of Yanukovych's leadership and his commitment to the values of mainstream Europe. Shortly before the two sides met on Monday, an EU statement said Barroso and Van Rompuy would take Yanukovych to task over her case.

"The need for comprehensive judicial reform and for steps against politically motivated or selective justice in Ukraine will be underlined by the EU leaders," the statement said.

"The Ukrainian authorities need to demonstrate they abide by the values that are at the heart of this association: democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and independence of judiciary," the statement quoted Barroso as saying.

Yanukovych said Friday that Ukraine was "geared up" for the agreement to be signed, though his optimism was not shared by other Ukrainian politicians.

It also seemed likely that Tymoshenko would again call for the association agreement to be signed — irrespective of her plight — for the good of Ukraine.

Any deal would still need to be ratified by parliaments of all the 27 EU states and the European Parliament before it could be implemented, a process that at best could take many months.

The bloc is itself split over Ukraine with countries such as Poland, the outgoing EU president, keen to seize the opportunity to pry Ukraine away from Russia's grip, while other EU members refuse to give ground on the principle of democratic values.

Though Yanukovych put a brave face on the outcome, a failed summit leaves him and his government with a weakened hand in dealings with Moscow from whom it is seeking a more

advantageous gas pricing deal than the one negotiated by Tymoshenko as prime minister.

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