

Ex-Premier Of Ukraine Accused of Murder

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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KIEV — Ukraine's chief prosecutor accused jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko of ordering the killing of a business rival 16 years ago, dealing a new blow to the former prime minister, who the West says is the victim of a political vendetta.

The announcement came Friday after a court adjourned a second trial against Tymoshenko for tax evasion and her defense counsel warned that her health had declined to a "critical" level. Tymoshenko is already serving a seven-year jail sentence for abuse of office, meted out in October 2011.

She and Western governments say she is the victim of a witch hunt by the leadership of President Viktor Yanukovich, who narrowly beat her in a run-off for the presidency in February 2010.

Political enemies of the 52-year-old politician have indicated for a year that another case was

building against her over the killing of Yevhen Shcherban, a deputy and businessman who died in a hail of bullets in 1996 as he stepped from a plane.

But the announcement by state prosecutor Viktor Pshonka that Tymoshenko, a powerful gas trader in the 1990s, had conspired with a former prime minister, Pavlo Lazarenko, in ordering a \$2.8 million "hit" against Shcherban came as a surprise. If convicted she could face life imprisonment, Pshonka said in remarks carried by Interfax.

"The material that has been assembled in the pretrial investigation testifies to the fact that Tymoshenko indeed ordered the killing together with Lazarenko. Today investigators went to Tymoshenko to present her with the suspicions about the crime," Pshonka said.

Lazarenko was jailed for nine years in the United States for fraud and money laundering. He served his sentence but is still in detention in the United States over immigration issues.

Jailed in October 2011 on charges of abuse of office linked with a 2009 gas deal she brokered with Russia as prime minister, Tymoshenko has spent much time hospitalized for back trouble, causing her second trial to be postponed repeatedly.

At an emotional press conference Friday, her defense lawyer Serhiy Vlasenko said: "Yulia Tymoshenko's health condition is worsening sharply." Looking shaken after visiting her in hospital, Vlasenko said he had found her lying in the shower room in her quarters.

"When I entered, I thought she had died. For two minutes, she couldn't recognize me. I had to call for the head doctor. I am not an expert, but in my opinion the situation is critical," he said. He did not provide more details of her condition.

Shcherban's killing followed several other murders in Donetsk, including a soccer stadium bombing that killed the owner of Shakhtar Donetsk club, and led to a realignment of political and business alliances in the key steel and coal-producing region. Back then, both Tymoshenko and Yanukovich were big players in a turbulent region, which seethed with intrigue and where fortunes were made and lost in murky dealings ranging from sales of state assets to protection rackets, extortion and theft.

Pshonka said in May last year that investigators were trawling through evidence in the case, including new testimony from the dead man's son.

Ruslan Shcherban was 19 at the time and survived the attack by hiding under a car, but he emerged last year to say he had evidence implicating Tymoshenko.

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