

Lawyer of Ukrainian Ex-Premier Under Fire

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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KIEV — The top lawyer for jailed former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko was stripped of parliamentary immunity and his seat in the Ukrainian legislature on Wednesday, in a move that is likely to further strain Kiev's ties with the West.

Serhiy Vlasenko, Tymoshenko's main defense lawyer and close ally, has accused the authorities of preparing to arrest him in order to deprive Ukraine's top opposition leader of qualified legal defense. The United States and the European Union have warned Kiev against this move.

Ukraine's Highest Administrative Court on Wednesday ruled to strip Vlasenko of his legislative seat on grounds that he illegally combined the jobs of a legislator and a lawyer.

Vlasenko denies the charges, saying he defended Tymoshenko for free and thus did not break any rules. While the Ukrainian constitution prohibits national legislators from holding public

office or engaging in any other jobs to prevent a conflict of interest, this regulation has been overlooked by many lawmakers in the past.

For instance, pop diva Taisia Povaliy continues to perform at concerts even though she was elected to parliament on the ticket of the ruling Party of the Regions. Other legislators are known to run business empires through friends and family.

Tymoshenko's party accused President Viktor Yanukovich of going after Vlasenko to crush the opposition and predicted that Ukraine would find itself further alienated from the West.

"It's a strictly politically motivated case," said Arseniy Yatsenyuk, a leader of Tymoshenko's party. "This case has a client: Yanukovich; an organizer: the presidential administrator; and those who carried it out: five guys dressed in judge's robes."

The decision was likely to cause anger in Washington and Brussels, which have condemned the prosecution of Tymoshenko and her top allies as politically motivated.

Brussels said it would not sign a strategic cooperation agreement with Kiev unless its democratic record shows improvement.

Tymoshenko was sentenced to seven years in jail on charges of abuse of office while negotiating a gas contract with Russia in 2009 and has also been accused of organizing the murder of a businessman nearly two decades ago.

Vlasenko told reporters in January that he was under criminal investigation in several cases, including being accused of stealing his own car.

The U.S. State Department warned Kiev on Tuesday against moving against Vlasenko.

"The United States is deeply concerned by recent steps taken in Ukraine to remove members of parliament from the Rada," the State Department said in a statement.

"These actions appear to be politically motivated due to his connection with Mrs. Tymoshenko."

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