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# Yanukovych Pardons Jailed Allies of Ex-Premier

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Former Ukrainian Interior Minister Yury Lutsenko standing in the defendant's cage before a hearing in May 2011. **Vladimir Sindeyev**

KIEV — Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych on Sunday pardoned two jailed allies of his main political opponent, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, but took no steps to free the imprisoned opposition leader herself.

In a move clearly intended to appease critical Western governments, and particularly the European Union, Yanukovych signed a decree pardoning former Interior Minister Yury Lutsenko and former Ecology Minister Heorhiy Filipchuk. Both had been serving jail terms for abuse of office.

The presidential pardon, which Yanukovych himself had hinted at, was the first sign of any relaxation in a drive against Tymoshenko and her allies in which several of her ministers have been jailed or fled abroad to avoid prosecution.

It came after a week of sharpening political tension in the former Soviet republic, where

the united opposition, re-energized by a strong showing in an election in October, blocked parliamentary proceedings and forced pro-Yanukovych deputies to hold a rival parliamentary session in a separate building.

The release of Tymoshenko and her allies is one of the key demands of the united opposition.

Despite Sunday's decree, Yanukovych showed no signs of clemency toward Tymoshenko, who is serving a seven-year jail sentence also for abuse of office.

The peasant-braided, 52-year-old former heroine of Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution street protests came close to beating Yanukovych in a bitter run-off for president in February 2010 and is regarded as his fiercest challenger.

Apart from the charge for which she is currently in prison, Tymoshenko is also being prosecuted for alleged embezzlement and tax evasion. Pretrial hearings are also being conducted in Kiev in a third case against her for allegedly ordering a contract killing of a local businessman and parliament deputy in 1996.

"Yanukovych signed a decree on pardoning six convicted people, including Ukraine's former interior minister, Yury Lutsenko, and Ukraine's former environment minister, Heorhiy Filipchuk," his office said in a statement.

Lutsenko, 48, had been serving a four-year sentence at a jail 230 kilometers north of Kiev and only last week had his appeal against conviction rejected by a court. His press secretary said that he had already been released and that his wife and a group of supporters were on their way to pick him up.

The U.S. and the EU say the prosecutions of Tymoshenko and former members of her government are politically motivated. The EU bloc has made their release a condition for signing landmark deals on trade and political association with Kiev.

Brussels has urged Ukraine to show progress in addressing the issue of selective justice, among others, by May, or risk having the deals shelved for years.

According to the decree, Yanukovych's clemency decision was based on a request by the state ombudsman and took into account the health of the two men.

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