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## **Ukraine leader says won't meddle in Tymoshenko trial**

Olzhas Auyezov, Reuters July 8, 2011, 8:02 pm



KIEV, July 8 (Reuters) - Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich on Friday denied accusations of orchestrating the criminal prosecution of his political rival, former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

Tymoshenko, who narrowly lost to Yanukovich in the 2010 presidential election, faces up to 10 years in prison on abuse-of-power charges while in office and is the target of several other pending criminal cases.

Her case has raised questions over the independence of the judiciary in the former Soviet republic at the time when its government is trying to forge closer ties with the European Union.

During the trial, which is being broadcast live on local television, Tymoshenko has denied any wrongdoing and repeatedly accused the prosecution and the court of following orders from Yanukovich's office.

Several hundred of her supporters staged raucous demonstrations on Kiev's main thoroughfare in solidarity with her on Friday.

Tymoshenko's lawyer was taken out of the courtroom by medical services after complaining of exhaustion and the court adjourned the hearings until July 11.

Speaking at a briefing on the same day, Yanukovich said he had nothing to do with Tymoshenko's case.

"The prosecution and the court ... are making their own conclusions and decisions," he said. "I do my best not to interfere and to avoid jumping to conclusions ... The court will make a final ruling."

The prosecution alleges that in 2009, following a bitter price row with Russia that disrupted supplies to Western Europe, Tymoshenko forced the then-head of state energy firm Naftogaz to sign a deal with Russia's Gazprom without consulting her government.

Yanukovich's administration says the 2009 agreement was a sell-out of national interests but that it is abiding by the terms since efforts to renegotiate the deal have so far failed.

On Friday, Yanukovich said he would discuss the issue again this month with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, with whom he agreed a gas price discount last year.

## LONG-TIME RIVALS

Yanukovich has tilted Ukraine's foreign policy toward Russia and abandoned plans to join NATO, although he says the country wants to join the European Union eventually.

Since he came to power, several former members of Tymoshenko's cabinet have been prosecuted for alleged offences in office and at least one has fled Ukraine, sparking a diplomatic row with the Czech Republic that granted him asylum.

Western governments and, in particular, the European Union, with which Ukraine is negotiating an association agreement, have expressed concern over the appearance of "selective justice" which those cases created.

Tymoshenko, 50, gained international prominence as a charismatic leader of the 2004 "Orange Revolution" demonstrations that ultimately doomed Yanukovich's first bid for the presidency but failed to produce a unified new government.

Subsequent infighting between Tymoshenko and her former ally, then-President Viktor Yushchenko, doomed the "orange" coalition and allowed Yanukovich to win the 2010 election rematch.

Tymoshenko remains one of the most popular politicians in the country, although she has so far failed to unite other opposition figures around her.

(Writing by Olzhas Auyezov; editing by Richard Balmforth and Philippa Fletcher)