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## **Ukraine calls strategic pause in Tymoshenko trial**

The trial of Ukrainian ex-prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, on a charge of abuse of office, was adjourned on Friday for 11 days to give the political leadership time to ponder its next move in the face of fierce criticism from the West.

Judge Rodion Kireyev said the trial of the 50-year-old opposition leader would be paused until October 11 at the earliest, and was expected to announce his verdict soon after it resumed.

State prosecutors have asked for a seven-year jail sentence to be passed on the charismatic politician who they allege exceeded her powers as prime minister by forcing through a 2009 gas deal with Russia to the detriment of Ukraine.

She denies this and says the trial is a vendetta against her by her arch-rival, President Viktor Yanukovich.

Kireyev gave no specific reason for the adjournment. He said the court would re-convene again "round about" October 11.

But political commentators said it was clearly designed to give Yanukovich and his ruling circle a breathing space in which to consider their options following pressure from the European Union and the United States over the case.

The EU, with which Ukraine is negotiating important agreements on association and free trade, has said these will be jeopardised if Tymoshenko is jailed.

It has urged Yanukovich to push through amendments to the criminal law to re-classify the charge against Tymoshenko to allow her to go free and continue as an opposition politician.

"Yanukovich needs these two weeks to make a decision. He is in a difficult situation in that the prosecutor has asked for a seven-year jail sentence on Tymoshenko," said political analyst Viktor Nebozhenko.

"They (the Yanukovich administration) are looking for a solution ... If he (Yanukovich) puts her in jail she will become at a stroke the most famous dissident in Europe, and who needs that?," he said.

### **TOUGH MESSAGE**

EU officials again spelled out the tough message to Yanukovich on Friday at an 'Eastern partnership' summit in neighbouring Poland.

"We have expressed ourselves very clearly to the authorities of Ukraine that the whole EU, and each of us separately, believe the bad treatment of the democratic opposition and the violation of democratic standards ... may overshadow the final stage of the negotiations (on association agreement)," Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk told a Warsaw news conference.

"We expressed our concern about the fate of the former prime minister and we expressed our rejection of a possible selective use of criminal judicial measures against former government members," said European Council president Herman van Rompuy.

In comments to the court before the adjournment, Tymoshenko, who spoke for four hours on Thursday, said: "The sentence which Kireyev will announce will testify to whether Yanukovich wants European integration for Ukraine."

Yanukovich, who narrowly beat Tymoshenko in an election for president in February 2010, denies he is hounding Tymoshenko and says her trial is part of efforts by his leadership to root out corruption.

### **"LYNCHING" TRIAL**

In an impassioned speech on Thursday, the fiery opposition leader said she was the victim of a "classic lynching trial" which had brought humiliation on the country.

The leadership says Tymoshenko's action in pressuring the state energy firm Naftotgaz into signing a 2009 agreement with the Russian gas giant Gazprom saddled Ukraine with exorbitant prices for gas.

The trial has polarised public opinion in the ex-Soviet republic and led to street demonstrations against Yanukovich.

Tymoshenko, a stylish dresser with a trademark peasant-style hairbraid, is idolised by many older voters, particularly women, in central and eastern Ukraine.

But, although she is a powerful orator and a shrewd political operator, she can be abrasive and is regarded as a divisive figure even by many other opposition figures.

All the same, many commentators say the trial has turned into a public relations disaster for Yanukovich, drawing criticism from the West and resurrecting Tymoshenko as a political force.

Hundreds of Tymoshenko supporters, with riot police stationed nearby, have been camped outside the courtroom throughout the summer in solidarity with her.

(Additional reporting by Gabriela Baczynska in Warsaw; writing by Richard Balmforth; editing by Philippa Fletcher)