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## Ukraine parliament rejects Tymoshenko reprieve



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Ukraine's parliament on Tuesday rejected a move to downgrade the abuse-of-power offence under which former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko has been jailed, dealing a blow to prospects of an early release for the charismatic opposition leader.

The move, which killed off any immediate chance of a compromise being found to free Tymoshenko and put Ukraine's relations with the European Union back on track, deepened the gloom in her increasingly somber camp.

The outcome "left no doubt that the authorities intend to continue political repression," Andriy Kozhemyakin, a deputy of her BYuT party said.

The opposition leader was jailed for seven years last month for exceeding her powers as prime minister in forcing through a gas deal with Russia in 2009 which the present Ukrainian leadership says saddled the country with an exorbitant price for Russian gas.

She denies wrong-doing and says the trial is a vendetta against her by President Viktor Yanukovich who beat her for the presidency in a bitterly-fought run-off vote in February 2010.

The case has soured the ex-Soviet republic's relations with the EU weeks ahead of a summit in which the sides had planned to initial deals on political association and free trade.

The 27-member bloc sees Tymoshenko's prosecution as politically motivated and has warned Kiev the deals may not be signed if she remains in jail.

All the same, deputies from Yanukovich's Party of Regions, which dominates parliament, voted down a proposal by her allies to reclassify the abuse-of-power offence as a misdemeanor -- a move which would have led to her being freed from detention.

Only 147 deputies out of 438 supported the proposal when it went to the vote. A few other similar proposals were also turned down by the majority.

### STALIN-ERA

Deputies from Tymoshenko's BYuT party walked out of the room after their defeat. Kozhemyakin said: "You (parliament) had a chance today to cancel the shameful Stalin-era (Criminal code) articles that were used against popular leaders in the previous decades."

Tymoshenko's lawyer Serhiy Vlasenko told Reuters this week she was pinning her hopes on foreign courts such as the European Court of Human Rights where she could apply after a local appeals court rules on her case.

Her supporters say the 50-year-old charismatic politician, known for her trademark peasant hair braid, stylish dressing and fiery public speaking, is in bad health and has been unable to walk for more than a week.

While she has been in police detention pending appeal against her conviction, prosecutors have continued to pile further charges on her. Last week she was further charged with tax evasion and theft dating back to the 1990s.

Tymoshenko's path crossed fatefully with that of Yanukovich when she helped lead the 2004 'Orange Revolution' street protests which doomed his first bid for the presidency.

Twice prime minister, she remains one of Ukraine's most popular politicians.

Tymoshenko's supporters say Yanukovich fears her as a political rival and is trying to eliminate her as a force in the run-up to the October 2012 parliamentary elections.

Yanukovich has styled the prosecution of Tymoshenko as part of a drive against malpractice and corruption in government.

(Additional reporting by Pavel Polityuk; Editing by Richard Balmforth)