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Poland, Sweden to try football diplomacy on Ukraine

Poland and Sweden's foreign ministers are to meet Ukraine's richest man, billionaire Rinat Akhmetov, in a new bid to secure the release of Ukrainian opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko whose jailing has shaken Ukraine's relations with the West.

The new attempt by European Union members to put pressure on President Viktor Yanukovich to bring about the release of his political rival came as a Ukrainian human rights monitor expressed concern over Tymoshenko's health.

Nina Karpacheva, who has parliamentary authority to check on sensitive human rights cases, said she visited Tymoshenko, 50, in her detention cell in Kiev on Sunday.

"Tymoshenko's state of health is very bad. She could not get out of bed when she spoke to me. She needs to be looked at and get treatment outside police detention," Karpacheva told Ukraine's Channel 5 TV.

An official source in Stockholm said on Monday that Sweden's Carl Bildt and Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski would have talks with billionaire Rinat Akhmetov, at an international soccer match in eastern Ukraine on Wednesday on important political issues.

Akhmetov, a steel and mining tycoon whose net wealth is put at \$16 billion by Forbes, bankrolled Yanukovich's election campaign in 2009-10 and is one of his most influential backers.

Tymoshenko, a former prime minister, was jailed for seven years last month for abuse of office while in power and is being held in police detention in Kiev pending consideration of appeal against sentence and verdict.

She denies the charge against her and says her trial was part of a vendetta against her by Yanukovich who beat her narrowly in a bitterly-contested run-off for the presidency in February 2010.

The EU has condemned the trial as politically-motivated and warned Yanukovich that an association agreement is now in jeopardy.

EU members Poland and Sweden, which have led a drive to improve the ex-Soviet republic's ties with the bloc, are now trying to stop the affair dealing a death blow to the agreement.

The source in Sweden said Sikorski and Bildt would meet Akhmetov in Donetsk on Wednesday. Akhmetov owns Shakhtar Donetsk football club whose team is playing Porto of Portugal in a champions league match.

"They will discuss the current political important issues in Ukraine. And it would be strange if they didn't discuss that (the detention of former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko)," the source said.

"Political developments in the country are what they will discuss. The talks are important but informal," the source added.

The Polish foreign ministry declined to comment.

Bildt said on his blog on Monday that the main purpose of the trip was to take the temperature on political developments.

"The relationship with Ukraine remains important, however very complicated currently," Bildt said on his blog.

The influential Ukrainian online newspaper Ukrainska Pravda said: "It is expected that the European politicians will try to bring influence to bear on Viktor Yanukovich with the help of people from his circle."

The newspaper said the visit could be the last chance for Yanukovich to have a change of heart over Tymoshenko and save a summit with the EU planned to take place in Kiev next month.

The 27-member EU and Ukraine had planned to sign deals on political association and free trade at the summit. However, relations have soured so much over Tymoshenko that the sides may now simply initial the agreements.

(Reporting by Anna Ringstrom in Stockholm; Writing by Richard Balmforth in Kiev)