

Ukraine ex-PM Tymoshenko's trial adjourned

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KIEV (Reuters) - The trial of former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko was adjourned until July 6 after the embattled opposition leader hired a new lawyer and once again refused to stand up to honour the judge.

Tymoshenko, who faces up to 10 years' prison if found guilty on abuse of power charges, has dismissed the case as a "mock trial" orchestrated by President Viktor Yanukovich's camp in order to get rid of his main political rival.

The case has raised concerns in the European Union with which Ukraine wants to sign an association agreement in order to attract badly needed foreign investment and ease its dependence of former Soviet overlord Russia.

In keeping with her combative style, Tymoshenko, 50, lectured judge Rodion Kireyev on criminal law, refused to stand up while addressing him and called the trial a farce.

Having brought in a new lawyer, she asked the court to give him one month to study the case but was granted time only until July 6.

"This means that tomorrow he will need to read over 4,000 pages," Tymoshenko told the court during the hearings which were broadcast live on local television. "Is this justice? No, this is not justice."

The prosecution alleges that Tymoshenko, who was twice prime minister, abused her power in the signing of a 2009 gas import deal with Russia that ended a price row which briefly disrupted Russian gas supplies to Western Europe via Ukraine.

It says that, without consulting her government, she forced the then-head of state-owned Naftogaz to sign the gas deal with Russia's Gazprom. Tymoshenko denies this.

The current administration, which took over after Tymoshenko narrowly lost to Yanukovich in the 2010 presidential election run-off, says the agreement was a sell-out of national interests, though it is abiding by its terms.

Some of those close to Tymoshenko believe the court is unlikely to jail her and will instead give her a suspended sentence, barring her from taking part in future parliamentary and presidential elections.

Separate cases are pending against Tymoshenko over alleged misuse of government funds received in exchange for emission quotas sold to Japan under the Kyoto protocol and over purchases of emergency rescue cars by her government.

Since Yanukovich came to power, several of Tymoshenko's former associates have been prosecuted for alleged offences in office and at least one has fled Ukraine.

Western governments have not publicly supported Tymoshenko but have expressed concerns over the possible use of "selective justice" in Ukraine.

The U.S. Department of State last month urged Kiev to refrain from actions that create "the appearance of a political motive." Yanukovich has repeatedly denied any political motive and said his government was merely fighting corruption.

Tymoshenko became known as the "gas princess" in the late 1990s as owner of a company which bought and sold Russian gas.

Her charisma and oratory skills brought her to the forefront of the 2004 "Orange Revolution" street demonstrations that ultimately doomed Yanukovich's first bid for the presidency.

She went on to serve two terms as prime minister under ex-President Viktor Yushchenko, her Orange Revolution ally, although their relationship quickly soured.

Early last year, with many people disillusioned by the "orange" leadership and infighting between Tymoshenko and Yushchenko that took place at the time of economic downturn, Yanukovich emerged victorious in the election.

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

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