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Old "Orange" rivals square off at Ukraine trial

Old rivals from Ukraine's doomed "Orange Revolution" clashed at the trial of former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko on Wednesday with ex-president Viktor Yushchenko roundly condemning a 2009 gas deal with Russia brokered by her.

Tymoshenko, who spearheaded mass street protests in Kiev in 2004 that thwarted a rigged presidential election and brought Yushchenko to power, is on trial for abuse of office linked to the gas deal signed while she was his prime minister.

Though they stood side-by-side in the 2004 protests, the pair quickly fell out once in power and were barely on speaking terms.

In-fighting led to the collapse of their alliance and a comeback by their nemesis, Viktor Yanukovich, who was elected president in February 2010 after narrowly beating Tymoshenko.

Their old rivalry quickly resurfaced on Wednesday when Yushchenko, giving evidence, denounced the 2009 agreement as a "political" deal which continued to inflict economic damage on Ukraine.

"We got, and we will have for the next nine years, a most destabilising factor -- this agreement," he told the court as Tymoshenko, seated just three metres away, looked coldly at him.

He said the basis for the deal, which was signed after talks between Tymoshenko and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, had been "a political scenario" rather than based on economics.

"Russia needed an obliging leader," he added.

His evidence appeared to support the prosecution's case that Tymoshenko rail-roaded Ukraine's state gas company Naftogaz into signing a deal with Russia's Gazprom which saddled the country with too high a price for Russian gas.

"GOD WILL JUDGE" YUSHCHENKO

Tymoshenko denies exceeding her authority in connection with the gas deal and has denounced the trial as a vendetta by her arch-rival Yanukovich. She faces up to 10 years in jail if convicted.

Notorious for her sharp tongue and tart comments, she coolly turned down an invitation to cross-examine Yushchenko, saying she did not want to give Yanukovich the satisfaction of seeing the two former allies squabbling.

"I will not ask questions because I don't want this court to pass judgement on the 'Orange Revolution'. I want everything that Yushchenko says to be on his conscience. God will be his judge," she said. "I will not give pleasure to Bankova (Yanukovich's presidential headquarters)."

Though still combative, the stylish 50-year-old politician who wears a peasant hair-braid to emphasise her links with the rural bedrock of Ukraine, is thinner in the face and looks more tired after almost two weeks of spending nights in police detention.

She was ordered on August 5 to be held in police custody for the duration of the trial after denouncing the judge as a "puppet" of Yanukovich and being deemed to have disrupted proceedings.

Tymoshenko enjoys almost iconic stature in parts of the country and Yushchenko's testimony sparked anger among her supporters.

After Yushchenko had finished speaking, Mykhailo Kosiv, a parliamentary deputy and one-time ally, called out: "Scum! I am deeply ashamed of this man. I was once one of his closest friends and he has turned out to be scum."

Tymoshenko supporters, hundreds of whom are camped day and night outside the courtroom, threw eggs at Yushchenko's car and shouted abuse as he was driven from the courtroom.

Tymoshenko's police detention has drawn sharp criticism from the United States and the European Union which say it adds to the impression of a politically motivated trial.

But Yanukovich says he will not interfere. The judge on Wednesday refused to heed Tymoshenko's calls for the pace of the trial to be slowed down to allow her more time to rest and better prepare her defence.