

The West Australian – 24.08.2011

Richard Balmforth

Ukraine court bars ex-PM's release for Independence Day

A Ukrainian court Tuesday refused to release former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko from police custody during her trial on the eve of the 20th anniversary of Ukrainian independence.

The detention of Tymoshenko, ordered on August 5 by the judge because of her alleged disruptive behaviour in court, elicited sharp criticism from the United States and the European Union, which see her trial as politically motivated.

Tymoshenko, on trial for abuse of office during her time as prime minister, had requested parole for two days to be able to visit her mother in the east of the country and celebrate with her Ukraine's independence anniversary.

Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union is celebrated on August 24.

Tymoshenko's press service said the court's judge had refused her plea. "The court has decided to refuse Tymoshenko's request," it quoted judge Rodion Kireyev as saying.

Earlier Tuesday, President Viktor Yanukovich sought to appease his critics in the European Union amid tension over the trial of his adversary Tymoshenko, pledging to push forward with moves for a free trade zone.

The trial of Tymoshenko, Yanukovich's rival for the presidency early last year, has driven up tension on the eve of rallies Wednesday to mark Independence Day.

Speaking ahead of the celebrations, Yanukovich made no mention of the trial, which continued in a Kiev courtroom on Tuesday, but put the accent on continued economic reform and moves to join the European mainstream.

"I believe that in 2011 we will complete negotiations with the EU on political association with the EU and creation of a deep and comprehensive free trade zone," he said.

"This will be convincing testimony of the irreversibility of our civilised choice and of the practical steps to implant in Ukraine a European social model," he said.

Yanukovich balanced his comments by saying ties with Russia, which provides Ukraine with crucial deliveries of natural gas, remained a "strategic priority."

The shrill pro-Tymoshenko opposition has sought to label Yanukovich as an opponent of progress and change who is manipulated by wealthy magnates and criminal gangs.

Tymoshenko's trial on a charge of abuse of office linked with a gas deal signed with Russia in 2009 when she was prime minister has brought hundreds of her supporters out on to the streets of Kiev every day.

Leaflets handed out at a tent encampment of her followers set up in front of the Kiev courtroom where she is being tried have called for mass demonstrations Wednesday.

August 24, 1991 was the day when Ukraine's local parliament issued a declaration of independence though it only finally became independent when the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of that year.

(Editing by Mark Heinrich)