

The West Australian – 17.09.2011

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Ukraine PM says EU's Tymoshenko stance "immoral"

The European Union's threat to scrap planned free trade and association agreements with Ukraine if it jails former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko is immoral, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov said on Saturday.

European diplomats said this week the EU wanted to see Tymoshenko, who is under arrest and on trial over abuse-of-office charges that she says are politically motivated, free and politically active.

Otherwise, they said, EU members could refuse to ratify the free trade and political association agreements that the two sides hope to initial in December.

"Such global, serious issues as Ukraine's European integration ... are so important that linking them to a particular trial is not just incorrect but immoral," Azarov told reporters in the Ukrainian Black Sea resort of Yalta.

EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy commissioner Stefan Fule said this week he had received assurances that Ukraine would find a solution to the Tymoshenko case by reclassifying her alleged offence as one that is not a felony.

Azarov declined to comment on whether that would happen but said he was optimistic about planned deals with the European Union.

"I am convinced that commonsense will prevail in our relations and that the free trade agreement and the association agreement will be signed," he said.

Tymoshenko, 50, the fiercest political opponent of President Viktor Yanukovich, is accused of illegally forcing state energy firm Naftogaz into the 2009 gas deal with Russia's Gazprom.

She has dismissed all charges as a political vendetta by Yanukovich who beat her narrowly in a 2010 presidential election.

(Reporting by Olzhas Auyezov; editing by Elizabeth Piper)