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Prague grants asylum to Tymoshenko's husband

PRAGUE: The husband of jailed former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko was granted political asylum in the Czech Republic on Friday, an official said.

Interior Ministry spokesman Vladimir Repka said his ministry approved the application submitted by Oleksandr Tymoshenko, but refused to provide details.

Yulia Tymoshenko, Ukraine's top opposition leader and a former presidential candidate, was sentenced to seven years in jail in October in a trial the West has condemned as politically motivated. She has reportedly been in poor health and denied medical care while locked up in a Kiev, Ukraine, prison. In December, the EU balked at signing a landmark cooperation agreement with Ukraine over the jailing of Tymoshenko.

In Moscow, Yulia Tymoshenko's lawyer, Serhiy Vlasenko, said Friday on Russia's NTV television that Oleksandr Tymoshenko had asked for asylum in the Czech Republic because he is being targeted in an ongoing probe into his wife's business activities when she owned a top Ukraine's energy company.

Vlasenko said Oleksandr requested asylum because a criminal investigation has been launched against him in Ukraine in an attempt to increase pressure on his jailed wife.

This isn't the first time the Czech Republic has acted regarding Yulia Tymoshenko's case. A year ago, the republic granted political asylum to Ukraine's former Economics Minister Bohdan Danylyshin, one of Tymoshenko's allies, who was charged with abuse of office in his country. The move strained relations between the two countries and Friday's move is expected to have the same effect. In May, Ukraine expelled two employees at the military section at the Czech Republic's Embassy in Kiev, accusing them of espionage. Czech officials said that was probably prompted by Danylyshin's case.

However, Czech Interior Minister Jan Kubice said that he doesn't believe the decision granting Oleksandr Tymoshenko asylum will harm his country's relations with Ukraine. According to the Czech register of companies, a man called Oleksandr Tymoshenko is listed as a co-owner of International Industrial Projects SRO, a company based in the Czech city of Usti nad Labem.