

Ukraine's ex-PM Tymoshenko arrested

KIEV, Ukraine--Acting on a judge's orders, police arrested former Ukraine Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko during her abuse-of-office trial for violations of court procedures.

Her supporters in court Friday, including national lawmakers, squabbled with riot police, trying to prevent them from driving her away in a prison car and shouting: "Shame! Shame!"

Dozens of Tymoshenko's supporters then gathered outside the court building in central Kiev and tried to block the road, but riot police pushed them aside.

The United States and the European Union have condemned court cases against Tymoshenko and several of her top allies as selective prosecution of political opponents. Germany on Friday expressed "great concern" about Tymoshenko's arrest.

Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's Kremlin-friendly president, has been accused by opposition activists and rights groups of trying to sideline his political opponents and muzzle critical media in a rollback on freedoms championed by his pro-Western predecessor.

The charismatic Tymoshenko, the country's top opposition leader, has criticized the trial as an attempt by Yanukovich to bar her from elections and mocked the court. Tymoshenko has refused to rise when addressing the court, as required, and routinely has insulted the judge. Her supporters have repeatedly disrupted hearings.

Complying with the presiding judge's orders, police surrounded Tymoshenko and escorted her out of the courtroom on Friday. Hundreds of police officers surrounded the prison car as it forced its way slowly through the crowd of Tymoshenko supporters.

Later, Tymoshenko's ally, Serhiy Vlasenko, showed reporters what he called a handwritten note from her describing her arrest as a "political repression."

The 50-year-old opposition leader is charged with abusing her powers by signing a natural gas import contract with Russia in 2009 that prosecutors claim was disadvantageous to Ukraine.

Tymoshenko insists she is innocent, arguing that the contract ended weeks of natural gas disruptions to Ukrainian and European consumers and that she was authorized to sign the deal as prime minister.