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Ex-Leader of Ukraine Is Held for Contempt; Activists See Purge in Progress



Sergey Svetlitsky/Associated Press

Riot police held off former Prime Minister Yulia V. Tymoshenko's supporters at the courthouse in Kiev, Ukraine, where she was arrested for contempt. She is on trial for "exceeding authority."

The former prime minister of Ukraine was arrested in a courtroom here on Friday for contempt, during her trial on what rights advocates say is a trumped up charge that centers on whether a document was stamped correctly.



Ms. Tymoshenko spoke to the news media at the Pecherskiy District Court in Kiev on Friday.

Supporters of the former prime minister, Yulia V. Tymoshenko, tried to stop the police from taking her into custody in the courtroom, and then tried to block the path of the car that took her away.

Ms. Tymoshenko told the police in the courtroom that she would not resist, and asked them not to put her in handcuffs, which they did not. Prosecutors said they had Ms. Tymoshenko arrested on the contempt charge after she openly mocked a witness, the current prime minister, Mykola Azarov, for speaking in Russian, rather than Ukrainian.

The trial of Ms. Tymoshenko and her arrest on Friday are part of what rights advocates say is a sweeping purge of opposition figures by President Viktor F. Yanukovich, a former Soviet apparatchik who assured an often skeptical country when he took power 18 months ago that he would uphold its generally democratic political practices.

Ms. Tymoshenko, who now faces 7 to 10 years in prison on charges of “exceeding authority” as prime minister, narrowly lost to Mr. Yanukovich in the election last year. In an interview this week, Ms. Tymoshenko, 50, said she was girding herself for prison, bracing for a new role as a post-Soviet dissident along the lines of Mikhail B. Khodorkovsky, the former oil company executive serving a 16-year sentence in Russia for fraud.

Such an outcome here would signal a calamitous turn away from democracy for Ukraine, she said, but added that, “I am ready for anything.”

“I am ready to fight, and for the consequences of fighting,” she said. “In this fight, I see a very important goal. I see the defense of Ukraine. And I am relying on the support of that part of society that sees Ukraine as a successful, competitive and independent European country.”

Concerns in the West that Ukraine’s foreign policy under Mr. Yanukovich, who was openly endorsed in the election by President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia, would swivel to Moscow have not been borne out.

Mr. Yanukovich is supporting integration with Europe alongside improved relations with Russia and has been negotiating simultaneously for trade pacts with a customs union of Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan and with the European Union. His first trip was to Brussels.

The most sweeping changes have come in domestic policy. His government has abrogated constitutional amendments curbing presidential powers, which were introduced after the Orange Revolution of 2004. A draft law on nongovernmental organizations would limit foreign financing and training of activists and journalists, similar to legislation in Russia.

Freedom House, a New York group monitoring political freedoms, downgraded Ukraine from a country deemed “free” to “partially free” in the year since Mr. Yanukovich came to power. Reporters Without Borders dropped Ukraine 42 places in its global ranking of press freedoms, to 131 out of 178 countries.

Just in the past year, prosecutors have arrested or opened investigations against 11 opposition figures, according to a report by the International Republican Institute, including the former interior minister, Yuriy V. Lutsenko, who was detained while walking his dog.

Ms. Tymoshenko first came under investigation last year, and her lawyers had expected the case to wrap up in a few weeks. Prosecutors say she overstepped her authority during negotiations with Russia in 2009 over the price of natural gas. Her supporters deny the specifics of the accusation — but say that even if they were true, they would hardly amount to a crime. She is not accused of corruption.

“The virtually unanimous view in the West is that the trial represents nothing more than a politically motivated attempt to sideline the opposition leader,” Steven Pifer, a former American ambassador to Ukraine and now a fellow at the Brookings Institution, wrote this week in an article in *Kyiv Post*.

Hanna Herman, the spokeswoman for Mr. Yanukovich, said that the government was pursuing a broad anticorruption agenda to prepare for closer political and trade relations with the European Union, and that both supporters and opponents of the president have been investigated and jailed.

In total, Ms. Herman said, more than 400 officials are under investigation or on trial and most of them are not in the opposition. Mr. Yanukovich, she said, “does not distinguish between supporters and opponents” in combating corruption.

Rights advocates dismissed the government’s claims of evenhandedness, saying it had not yet provided a list of the people under investigation.

After Ms. Tymoshenko’s arrest, Ms. Herman said the president did not intend to comment on the detention of his principal political adversary, saying it was a matter for the courts. “What does it have to do with him?” she said.

Ms. Tymoshenko has been prosecuted before — and exonerated — in relation to natural gas negotiations. In 2001, she spent 42 days in the same pretrial detention center, Lukyanovska Prison, where she was taken on Friday.

In court, Ms. Tymoshenko is refusing to stand to address the judge — in protest. The proceedings had been stretching late into the summer evenings — an indication, Ms. Tymoshenko's supporters said, that the judge was under pressure to reach a verdict quickly and dispatch her to prison before the summer holidays conclude.