

Ukraine Parliament Rejects Tymoshenko Reprieve

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KIEV — Ukraine's parliament on Tuesday voted against a proposal to downgrade the abuse-of-power offense under which former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko has been jailed, a move that could have led to her early release.

The opposition leader was jailed for seven years last month for abusing her powers in forcing through a gas deal with Russia in 2009 that the present Ukrainian leadership says saddled the country with an exorbitant price for Russian gas.

She denies wrongdoing and says the trial is a vendetta against her by President Viktor Yanukovich, who beat her for the presidency in a bitterly fought run off vote in February last year.

Tymoshenko's case has soured Ukraine's relations with the European Union weeks ahead of a summit in which the sides had planned to initial deals on political association and free trade.

The EU sees Tymoshenko's prosecution as politically motivated and has warned Kiev that

the deals may not be signed if she remains in jail.

But deputies from Yanukovich's Party of the Regions, which dominates the parliament, refused to let her go free on Tuesday in a move that had been largely expected by Tymoshenko's defense.

Parliament voted down a proposal by her allies and supporters to reclassify the abuse-of-power offense as a misdemeanor — an outcome that would have led to her being freed from police detention.

Only 147 deputies out of 438 supported the proposal.

Tymoshenko's lawyer Serhiy Vlasenko said this week that she was pinning her hopes on foreign courts such as the European Court of Human Rights where she could apply after a local appeals court rules on her case.

Tymoshenko, 50, was a leader of the 2004 Orange Revolution, which doomed Yanukovich's first bid for the presidency.

Twice prime minister, she remains one of Ukraine's most popular politicians.

Tymoshenko's supporters say Yanukovich is trying to eliminate her as a political force in the run-up to the October 2012 parliamentary elections. Yanukovich has styled the prosecution of Tymoshenko as part of a drive against malpractice and corruption in government.

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