

Tymoshenko Calls Murder Allegations 'Absurd'

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KIEV — Former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, serving a seven-year jail sentence on abuse-of-office charges, on Monday dismissed new allegations against her of involvement in the murder of a lawmaker almost 16 years ago.

She said they were "absurd" and clearly politically driven.

Ukrainian prosecutors are investigating her possible involvement in the 1996 killing of Yevhen Shcherban, a powerful businessman and politician who died in a hail of bullets as he emerged from a plane in Donetsk. The attackers, disguised as airport mechanics, also killed his wife and several bystanders.

His killing followed several other murders in Donetsk, including a football stadium bombing that killed the owner of the Shakhtar Donetsk club and led to a realignment of political and business alliances in the key steel- and coal-producing region.

Both Tymoshenko and her rival, President Viktor Yanukovich, were already big players in the

turbulent region, which seethed with intrigue and where fortunes were made and lost in murky dealings. Tymoshenko was head of the gas trader Unified Energy Systems, which was a major supplier of the fuel in Ukraine, while Yanukovych was deputy governor of Donetsk.

"Linking me to the Shcherban case is absurd," Tymoshenko said in the statement issued by her party, Batkivshchyna. "I believe that people will understand how poorly this case holds together, who benefits from it and how absurd it is."

State prosecutors say they have evidence that Tymoshenko could be involved in the case, along with Pavlo Lazarenko, who was prime minister at the time and has since been jailed in the United States for fraud and money-laundering.

Lazarenko denied any involvement in the murder, calling the accusations "cynical lies."

"I have nothing to do with this crime," Lazarenko said in a statement published by his lawyer Monday, Interfax reported.

Shcherban's son, Ruslan Shcherban, who was 19 at the time and survived the attack by hiding under a car, told reporters last week that he had evidence implicating Tymoshenko.

Ukraine's state prison service said last week that it had moved Vadim Bolotskikh, the man sentenced to life in prison for killing Shcherban and another powerful regional figure, to a detention center in Kiev, a move that means he could be questioned by prosecutors or testify in a court.

Tymoshenko was convicted in October of abusing her power as prime minister in forcing through a 2009 gas deal with Russia.

State prosecutors said March 28 that Tymoshenko would soon go on trial again on charges of tax evasion. They did not fix a date.

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