

Ukraine Leader Urges Pro-Europe Drive Despite Kremlin Pressure

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich urged parliament Tuesday to pass laws to underpin the country's pro-Europe drive, even as Russia renewed pressure on Kiev to halt its westward course.

But, with European envoys looking on, opposition politicians accused Yanukovich of endangering Ukraine's pro-Europe policy himself by failing to pledge an end to political trials and staying silent over his archrival, jailed ex-prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, whom Western governments want to be freed.

The European Union says her trial for abuse of office was political and her continued confinement could still jeopardize the signing of key association and free trade agreements with Ukraine at a summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, in November.

"The issue of Yulia Tymoshenko's release is a question of the political will of President Viktor

Yanukovich exclusively. Our principled position is that this was a political sentencing and it must be repealed, and quickly," said Vitaly Klitschko, the world boxing champion and potential challenger for the Ukrainian presidency who heads the UDAR (Punch) party.

In a keynote speech to parliament, Yanukovich urged deputies to prepare draft legislation to reform the judiciary and law-enforcement bodies and fight corruption to help bring the former Soviet republic more in line with EU standards.

The 28-member EU has set criteria for democratic progress that it says Ukraine must meet if the landmark agreements are to be signed in November.

"Success at the Vilnius summit must be prepared. Documents, vital for our further advancement towards Europe, must be approved. This is work which the Ukrainian parliament must do in order for Ukraine to be able to sign agreements on association and free trade with the EU," he declared.

Even as the Kiev government seeks to persuade the EU that Ukraine is a fit partner for the future, it has come under pressure from Russia, its biggest single trading partner which wants to entice it instead into a Russia-led Customs Union.

Russia fears a flood of highly competitive goods on the Russian market if Ukraine joins an EU free-trade zone.

In a warning shot to Ukraine, Russia conducted extra customs checks on Ukrainian imports over several days last month and President Vladimir Putin spoke of possible "protective" measures by Moscow and its Customs Union allies, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The pressure has led to talk of a trade war in Kiev and injected new tension into Moscow's relationship with Ukraine, which has pleaded unsuccessfully for a lower price for strategic supplies of Russian gas to bring relief to its economy.

The Kremlin renewed its charge over Ukraine's westward thrust Tuesday with a Putin aide warning that Kiev would forfeit special partner status if it went ahead with signing the EU agreements.

Sergei Glazev, Putin's point man on relations in the Customs Union, said this would put Ukraine in violation of a bilateral friendship and cooperation agreement with Russia.

"To sum up, by signing the Association Agreement (with the EU) Ukraine will lose its self-reliance and for us will cease to be a strategic, a complete, partner," Glazev said in an interview with Kommersant Ukraine newspaper.

Russia, which would like control of Ukraine's gas pipeline network, has used the promise of much cheaper gas to try to coax Kiev into the Customs Union — proposals dismissed by Yanukovich last week as "humiliating."

On Tuesday, he sought to calm Moscow's concerns, saying that Ukraine would always regard Russia as a strategic partner.

"Attempts to set cooperation in the European direction against cooperation with our strategic

partners — Russia and the countries of the Eurasian society — are groundless."

While Kiev has stuck to its aspiration to join the European mainstream, diplomats say it is unlikely that the agreements will be signed unless Yanukovich relaxes his stance on Tymoshenko.

Tymoshenko, his most dangerous opponent, was jailed for seven years in 2011. But she would be a real threat to his chances of re-election in 2015 if she were freed, and Yanukovich has shown no inclination to bow to EU pressure for her release.

European envoys are trying to persuade him to pardon her so she can go to Germany for treatment for back trouble. But he says he had no legal powers to allow this.

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