

Criminal Case Against Tymoshenko Opened on Eve of Putin Visit

April 11, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

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KIEV— Ukraine's state prosecutor's office has opened a criminal case against former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko over a gas deal she reached with Russia in 2009, a senior prosecutor said Monday.

Tymoshenko, who has already been accused in two other separate criminal cases since her rival, President Viktor Yanukovich, came to power, hit back immediately.

"They are launching new cases (against me) every day," she posted in a Twitter message. "They are going to run out of Criminal Code articles soon."

First Deputy Prosecutor General Renat Kuzmin linked the case against Tymoshenko, who served twice as prime minister for relatively short periods, to a deal she reached in January 2009 with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on supplies of Russian gas.

"A criminal case has been launched against the former prime minister over abuse of power

linked to the signing of gas contracts in 2009," Kuzmin told reporters. That agreement ended a standoff that had briefly disrupted Russian gas flows to Europe. It tied the price of gas from Russia's Gazprom to spot oil prices. As a result, Ukraine's gas bill has since been rising steadily.

Yanukovich's government has urged Russia to review the pricing formula, but talks have not been successful up to now. Tymoshenko, who accused the Yanukovich camp of using fraud to secure his election in February 2010, remains his main political rival, although she has failed to marshal other opposition parties behind her.

She says the criminal cases opened against her are politically motivated and she and her allies, some of whom have been arrested, are being victimized by Yanukovich.

Tymoshenko has been previously accused of misusing 380 million euros (\$550 million) from the sale of carbon emission rights under the Kyoto Protocol and spending state money on vehicles that were then used in her presidential campaign.

The new criminal case was announced on the eve of a visit by Putin, whose talks with Ukrainian officials on April 12 are likely to involve energy issues.

"It looks like there is not enough evidence in the previous cases for anything other than character attacks on Tymoshenko, so they are looking for more potential charges," said Volodymyr Fesenko, an analyst at Ukrainian think tank Penta.

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