



Rising contempt

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Criticism of Yulia Tymoshenko trial justified.

For reasons that go far beyond the fate of ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, international governments and domestic critics are justified in their concerns about the state of democracy, rule of law and justice under President Viktor Yanukovich.

If his administration keeps going down the authoritarian road, Yanukovich has no one to blame but himself and his wealthy backers for dashing Ukraine's democratic aspirations and chances of greater political and economic integration with the European Union.

The ongoing trial of Tymoshenko has exposed Ukraine's judiciary as cruel, arbitrary, inept and anything but independent. Judges are appointed and dismissed on on political whims. The nation's general prosecutor, Viktor Pshonka, views himself as part of Yanukovich's team.

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He shows it every step of the way by fast-tracking spurious charges against Tymoshenko while ignoring allegations of serious corruption among people close to Yanukovich (and even the president himself) while dragging his feet on solving such heinous crimes as the 2000 murder of journalist Georgiy Gongadze.

The rights to jury and public trials are routinely flouted. Authorities don't dare let a jury of the defendant's peers decide guilt or innocence because they would no longer be able to control the outcomes of trials.

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The judiciary does not even speak in its own defense. Western and Russian criticism of the Tymoshenko case was, instead, met with sharp counter-attacks by the Party of Regions, underscoring the political nature of this sad spectacle.

"In any democratic country, obstruction to justice, no matter where it comes from, is considered as a serious offense," the Party of Regions said.

Exactly, but this is not a democratic country and the courts here behave in contemptible fashion. Few are likely to believe Yanukovich's Aug. 11 denial: "I cannot and will not interfere in the work of the Ukrainian courts."

The pro-presidential Party of Regions insists that Tymoshenko signed an illegal, financially ruinous deal to end the January 2009 natural gas shutoff. If so, Yanukovich and his predecessor, President Viktor Yushchenko, had ample opportunities to cancel the agreement. They did not.

We suspect the reason for the charges against Tymoshenko have more to do with revenge against her for eliminating RosUkrEnergo, the controversial gas intermediary co-owned by businessmen close to Yanukovich, from the lucrative trade than any criminal act. Yanukovich and his billionaire friends are pursuing vendettas against those who stand in their way.

They seem so blinded by their desire for revenge that they are failing to see that they are fueling the opposition, not squelching it, and are turning away friends that Ukraine will need to prosper. Do they care at all about Ukraine's future? Or is all that matters their grip on power and business interests?

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