



Ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko on Sept. 13 in Kyiv. (Oleksandr Prokopenko)

Tymoshenko ready for battle again

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Something in the morning papers had annoyed Yulia Tymoshenko. A steely glint flashed in her eyes as she reached for copies of two newspapers she said are controlled by the Party of Regions.

She pointed to two articles that she said tried to portray her as “a has-been with no chance.”

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“They are trying to show that [the] opposition has died. ... But I think a cross will be placed on someone else’s political career,” she warned in typically combative language. She was clearly referring to her rival, President Viktor Yanukovich.

After her Feb. 7 election defeat in the run-off against Yanukovich and subsequent dismissal as prime minister, Tymoshenko is back in the position that many see as her strongest – that of fiery opposition leader.

Largely squeezed off national television channels, dismissed by critics as compromised by her alleged failures as prime minister, and with several of her allies under arrest or investigation, Tymoshenko now needs all the street-fighting skills she has learned over her colorful political career.

In a wide-ranging interview with the Kyiv Post earlier this month, she demonstrated that she still has the touch which helped her rally massive crowds of Orange Revolution voters, and continues to inspire millions of voters today.

In typical straight-talk, she accused the authorities of persecuting her supporters, seizing authoritarian control over the country and trying to sideline her party. She pledged to modernize her party, come up with a strategy to solve the country’s problems and fight back against President Yanukovich’s dominant Party of Regions.

Opposition leader

Tymoshenko dismissed claims that she had already had her chance to improve the country in her two stints as prime minister in 2005 and 2008-10. She said that constant pressure on her from then-President Viktor Yushchenko meant she was virtually in opposition.

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She faulted other opposition figures, staking her claim as the politician with the best shot of standing up to Yanukovich’s ever bolder steps at seizing more power.

“Looking for new faces is a new dead end. We should be looking for new ideas,” she said.

She wrote off former Parliamentary Speaker Arseniy Yatseniuk as having “no vision, no freedom.” Yushchenko “has no future,” she said. Svoboda leader Oleh Tiahnybok is “the kind of opposition Yanukovich dreams about,” as his nationalist message won’t gain popularity across the country.

She dismissed Deputy Prime Minister Sergiy Tigipko – whom polls place narrowly behind her in third, with the president in first place – as a puppet of the Regions Party.

“Strong Ukraine [Tigipko’s party] is a clone of Spravedlivaya Rossiya,” she said, referring to the pro-Kremlin opposition party, A Just Russia.

New ideas?

Following the election defeat to Yanukovich (which she still calls fraudulent), Tymoshenko suffered disappointment and exhaustion after battling the economic crisis as prime minister and fighting a tough campaign, her aides say.

Now she says she is ready to revamp her Fatherland Party. She says she’s working on creating a strategy for the country, including a package of laws and reforms and a new constitution.

According to Tymoshenko, the party will be decentralized, its ranks “cleansed” – 28 lawmakers were kicked out of her Bloc of Yulia Tymoshenko on Sept. 21 – and converted from a party that is run by “leadership directives.” Elections will be held for key party posts.

But the decoupling of her party from her dominating image will be tough, as she herself admitted.

Political analysts said this is hardly likely, as leader is the fundamental building block of any Ukrainian party, and an advantage Tymoshenko holds as a charismatic figure.

Under pressure

The first moves to change her party have met with resistance. After the party leadership in Kyiv and Lviv oblasts was changed, Tymoshenko said those dismissed formed a “fictitious” party called Fatherland, which intends to field candidates in local elections.

She said this was a trick by the presidential administration to squeeze her out.

Serhiy Lyovochkin, Yanukovich’s chief of staff, said earlier this month that these were “internal conflicts” within Tymoshenko’s party.

Tymoshenko claimed Yanukovich’s power is now “absolute,” across the executive, legislative and judiciary. She said her allies are being put under pressure to join the coalition.

“They (the coalition) are people ... who live by their own rules, not laws,” she said.

The presidential administration has repeatedly dismissed Tymoshenko’s claims as an insignificant blabber-mouth. But her allies claim to be feeling the pressure not only in parliament.

Several senior officials from her government are in jail and under investigation for corruption. “Yanukovich sees the opposition only in prisons, in exile, without access to media ... and even without the right to carry out public actions,” she said.

Gas deals

The net is closing in on Tymoshenko. Oleksandr Turchynov, her closest confidant, was called in for questioning by the SBU (State Security Service) three times in recent days.

The former state customs chief and deputy head of state gas company Naftogaz under Tymoshenko’s most recent tenure as premier are currently behind bars over the 2009 appropriation of 11 billion cubic meters of gas from middleman gas trader RosUkrEnergo, whose Ukrainian owners are close to Yanukovich’s inner circle.

Tymoshenko said the complex agreement was struck with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin after RosUkrEnergo failed to settle a debt to Gazprom of \$1.7 billion for gas. Naftogaz paid for it, she said. It was agreed that Naftogaz would take the gas in lieu of gas transportation fees for Russia using Ukraine’s pipelines.

Ukrainian billionaire Dmytro Firtash, co-owner of RosUkrEnergo along with Gazprom, took Naftogaz to an international arbitration court, claiming back the gas plus penalties.

The case was finally won by RosUkrEnergo, Tymoshenko claims, after “capitulation” by the Ukrainian side. Naftogaz must now return 12.1 billion cubic meters of gas, currently worth around \$5 billion.

Tymoshenko repeated claims that Energy Minister Yuriy Boyko and Lyovochkin are the links in the chain between the authorities and RosUkrEnergo and its Ukrainian co-owners Firtash (45 percent) and Ivan Fursin (5 percent). She said Firtash had overtaken Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine’s richest man, as the major financial supporter of Yanukovich’s Party of Regions. Both sides deny links.

Asked what evidence she had of Lyovochkin’s involvement in RosUkrEnergo, Tymoshenko replied: “People in politics know who is working with whom and who is carrying out business with whom.”

Lyovochkin, despite admitting friendships with Firtash and Fursin, denies any business links.

Boyko, at a sitting of the parliamentary investigative committee on the deal last week, admitted he had been on RosUkrEnergo’s board of directors, but said that he no longer is.

But he could not provide documents to prove that he had officially been relieved of these duties. Moreover, documents the committee has included as evidence show that Boyko has had business relations, of sorts, with Firtash, holding power-of-attorney over the billionaire’s assets in the past.

Roman Zvorych, chairman of parliament’s investigative commission on the RosUkrEnergo case, said: “These documents clearly indicate that there was at one time a business arrangement between Boyko and Firtash. And this may indicate grounds for possible collusion on the part of Boyko, specifically in the Stockholm arbitration case, in the ruling on behalf of RosUkrEnergo.”

“I don’t think they’ll touch her [Yulia Tymoshenko], as the same thing could happen again. It’s better to put pressure on her and weaken her.”

- Yuriy Yakymenko, head of political programs at the Razumkov Center.

Zvorych, considered a Tymoshenko ally, added: “But this document alone would need to be supported by an entire series of evidence to prove the case. Boyko, in turn, has given testimony where he has claimed that his business relationship with Firtash and RosUkrEnergo was cut on his initiative long ago. When asked if he remembered what year this was, he could not state with any certainty. And when asked if he could document these words, he could not provide such documents.”

With evidence building up to support Tymoshenko’s case against RosUkrEnergo and its close links with Yanukovich, the authorities appear to be taking harder shots at those close to her. It remains unclear whether they will go after Tymoshenko herself. It’s a prospect she seems almost to relish, and she has in recent weeks dared authorities to jail her, instead of her closest allies, insisting she gave all the orders for actions which they are charged for.

“The only thing that’s stopping him is that it could increase the public’s trust in me, turn me into a hero,” she said.

That mistake has been made before, when she was briefly thrown in jail under ex-President Leonid Kuchma in 2001 on corruption charges, which were eventually withdrawn, before emerging as a fearsome opposition champion.

Jailing Tymoshenko could build sympathy and invigorate supporters. Analysts say if she’s arrested, it will be her political lifeline. Instead, authorities seem inclined to cut her off from potential supporters.

“I don’t think they’ll touch her, as the same thing could happen again,” said Yuriy Yakymenko, head of political programs at the Razumkov Center. “It’s better to put pressure on her and weaken her.”

Comeback?

“I haven’t yet completed my role and task in politics, because the actions of Yushchenko, after he became president, took that possibility away.”

- Yulia Tymoshenko, opposition leader.

Can Tymoshenko launch a comeback?

The latest polls released by the Razumkov Center in late August – which she claims underestimate her support – show her party with 13.7 percent backing, down from 16.0 percent in June. Her negative rating of people who “do not support” her is the second highest among all Ukraine’s leading politicians, after Yushchenko, at 62.5 percent.

But a ray of light for Tymoshenko comes from the plunge in the Party of Regions support, from 41.2 percent in June to 27.6 percent in August.

She will look to capitalize on the unfulfilled promises and any growing discontent with Yanukovich’s increased grip on power.

“[People] tasted freedom after the Orange Revolution,” she said. “Now people are being offered something different. ... Fear has seized everyone. They probably won’t hit the streets, but they know how to behave toward this team – that’s where the hope is.”

“She is the only and most radical political force in the opposition,” said Razumkov’s Yakymenko. “If people become disappointed with the political and economic situation, they are likely to turn to her.”

“I haven’t yet completed my role and task in politics, because the actions of Yushchenko, after he became president, took that possibility away,” Tymoshenko said.

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