

Yulia Tymoshenko charged with ordering assassination

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On 18 January, the Prosecutor General of Ukraine charged Yulia Tymoshenko with the theft of property from the company she herself ran, the United Energy Systems of Ukraine (UESU), and with complicity in the 1996 murder of Yevhen Shcherban, an influential politician and entrepreneur from Donetsk. The second charge, which has also been levelled against the then Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko, is of ordering the assassination and subsequently making a payment to the assassins (via intermediaries). Bringing these charges does not mean the end of the investigation, however, and a date for bringing the indictment to court has not been determined.

In 1996, there was indeed a conflict between the so-called Dnipropetrovsk group that Lazarenko ran, and the Donetsk group, headed by Yevhen Shcherban. The reason for the conflict was the Donetsk group's opposition to the Dnipropetrovsk group's monopoly of gas supplies via the UESU company, which Yulia Tymoshenko ran. During the conflict, a series of contract killings took place. Shcherban's death forced the Donetsk group to make concessions and allow UESU onto the Donbas gas market. Shcherban's killers were caught and sentenced in 2002, but the investigation into who ordered the murder has been proceeding very slowly since then.

Commentary

- The main suspect in the murder is Pavlo Lazarenko, who in November 2012 was released from prison in the US after serving eight years in prison for money laundering. It is not known whether Ukraine has made any efforts to extradite him (bringing charges against Yulia Tymoshenko might be a prelude to such a move), nor what the chances of success might be. Putting Tymoshenko on trial alone would make it possible to defend her by placing all the blame on Lazarenko. Moreover, it seems that some of the Donetsk group's leaders want to have their revenge on Lazarenko.
- It is possible that the trial will be scheduled to take place during the presidential election campaign in 2015, in order to remind the public of the charges against Yulia Tymoshenko, which would hinder the opposition campaign. Any conviction of the former Prime Minister in a new case would permanently eliminate her from political life.

- The decision to press these charges against Tymoshenko on this particular date seems to be a demonstration, before the EU-Ukraine summit on 25 February, that Kiev will not make any concessions regarding the opposition leader, who has been accused of committing a felony. The Ukrainian government seems to be hoping that this will convince the EU to stop defending Tymoshenko. However, the opposite reaction should be expected from the Western states, which will lead to a further deterioration of relations between the EU and Ukraine.
- The opposition leaders' reactions to the new charges against Tymoshenko were very emotive, but purely verbal. No attempts have been made to organise demonstrations or pickets, which moreover would have been unlikely to succeed due to the harsh winter. However we may expect attempts from the opposition to obstruct parliamentary proceedings with requests for the charges to be withdrawn, and for the Attorney General to resign.