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Ukraine: The beginning of the trial of Yulia Tymoshenko

On 24 June, a preliminary hearing was held in the trial against Yulia Tymoshenko, who is accused of abuses of power as Prime Minister of Ukraine in 2009 while negotiating a gas contract with the Russian Federation. The trial undoubtedly has a political subtext; the Ukrainian government's objective for it is to eliminate Tymoshenko from political life. At the same time, it wishes to avoid a deterioration of relations with the European Union in connection with this trial.

The start of the main hearing is scheduled for 29 June, and the trial will probably take several months. The charges against Tymoshenko are quite serious, but they concern a failure to apply existing procedures, rather than any actions specifically to the detriment of the state. Regardless of how justified they are, there is no doubt that the trial of the former prime minister is political. Tymoshenko is the leading opposition figure, and under the electoral law, a convicted person (even under a suspended sentence) cannot participate in parliamentary or presidential elections. But it seems that President Viktor Yanukovych's team is divided as to how to proceed. On one hand, they have been unexpectedly surprised by the European Union's strong reaction to the trial, and are afraid of the consequences of convicting Tymoshenko. On the other, they realise that withdrawing the charges (by an acquittal, discontinuing the proceedings, etc.) would give the former prime minister an advantage in next year's election campaign. <TAO>