

Ukraine's blackmail system

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Taras Kuzio

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In Ukraine, businessmen are pressured to give financial and political support to the authorities or to testify against political opponents.



It could be argued that for Petro Poroshenko, elected Ukraine's fifth president on 25 May, and inaugurated 7 June, there is no more important step than freeing all political prisoners still languishing in Ukraine's jails. In doing this he would prove his commitment to the European values that he has declared would now underpin his administration.

In February, President Viktor Yanukovich fled the country, following the [gunning-down](#) of dozens of protesters at the hands of security services and special police troops (apparently, with assistance from Russia's FSB). This led to the release of 23 political prisoners, the most notable of whom was former Prime Minister and opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko. The interim leadership then rapidly [signed](#) an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), thus setting Ukraine on course towards European integration. The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, a component of the Association Agreement, is due to be signed this month.



Since then, the prevailing Western assumption has been that the overthrow of Yanukovich and the Euromaidan-inspired interim government had put an end to this unpleasant chapter of political repression, but Ukrainians continue to remain incarcerated for political reasons. A case in point is Vasyl Danyliv, imprisoned three years ago on trumped-up charges. Representations were made to the interim government, but his case is now lost in the labyrinth of Ukraine's moribund and still highly corrupt judicial system. There is little doubt there are other similar cases of political prisoners who have been forgotten, and remain trapped inside Ukraine's opaque prison system.

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Dyadechko and others

In summer 2012, Danyliv was detained as part of a warrant issued for the attempted murder of Serhiy Dyadechko, a former vice-president of Rodovid Bank, one of a number of banks that were assisted by the Ukrainian government after the 2008 global financial crisis, with large amounts of rescue capital that was subsequently misappropriated. As is so often the case in Ukraine, those involved in abuse of office and corruption never went to jail. Vasyl Danyliv has always [protested his innocence](#), asserting that he never knew Dyadechko, and had nothing to do with Rodovid Bank or the attempted assassination.

Dyadechko was a high-level supporter of then President Viktor Yanukovich and the Party of Regions, led by his long-time ally Prime Minister Mykola Azarov. The main witness to the bank fraud, multimillionaire Hennadiy Piskun, who testified against Dyadechko, mysteriously fell out of a seventh-floor Donetsk apartment window in October 2011, allegedly while attempting to fix the air conditioning unit. The head of the bank's legal department apparently 'slipped in the bath' and received serious head injuries after he was questioned by the SBU. He was hospitalised for many months.

Hennadiy Piskun mysteriously fell out of a seventh-floor Donetsk apartment window in October 2011

In reality, Danyliv was a pawn in what has been [described](#) as Ukraine's 'blackmail state' where businessmen are pressured to give financial and political support to the authorities or to testify against political opponents. In return for this support they receive commercial favours or trumped-up criminal charges are dropped as quickly as they have been drawn up.

The Tymoshenko case

The Yanukovich authorities imprisoned Tymoshenko in October 2011 for 'abuse of office,' using Soviet era articles in the criminal code. The plan was to remove the 'Tymoshenko problem' once and for all by sentencing her to life imprisonment for her alleged involvement, with an alleged accomplice, former Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko, in the [murder](#) of Yevhen Shcherban, a wealthy oligarch assassinated in 1996.

For the achievement of this objective, two 'witnesses' – Petro Kirichenko and Vasyl Danyliv – were deemed so crucial as to warrant the direct intervention of Interior Minister and police chief Vitaliy Zakharchenko and First Deputy Prosecutor Renat Kuzmin.

Petro [Kirichenko](#), who now lives in San Francisco, gave evidence at the 2004 US trial of [Pavlo Lazarenko](#), in exchange for which he was promised immunity by the FBI. In Ukraine, there were two criminal cases pending against Kirichenko and one against his wife, Isabella; three Ukrainian apartments belonging to them, and one office, had been seized by the police. In September 2011, Isabella Kirichenko travelled to Ukraine to sell the apartments: she was there imprisoned for three months and placed under house arrest for one month on trumped-up charges of fraud and forgery. The charges were dropped after the prosecutor's office received 'new evidence' from Mr Kirichenko that incriminated Lazarenko and Tymoshenko in the murder of Mr Shcherban.

Vasyl Danyliv was kept in solitary confinement in Kryvyy Rih prison. There, and in other detention centres, he was visited by Police Chief Zakharchenko, and other high-level police officers; yet one more example of political interference in Ukraine's judicial system. The aim was to 'persuade' him to testify that Yuliya Tymoshenko had been Lazarenko's accomplice: he had hired the killers and she had paid for the murder (at a cost of \$2.329 million, with Lazarenko contributing another half a million dollars in cash).

The police visitors also pressured Danyliv to discredit the evidence pointing to the involvement of others in the murder of Mr Shcherban, notably political and business leaders from Donetsk in the mid-1990s, such as then regional Governor Yanukovich. Danyliv refused to cooperate with the authorities in incriminating

Tymoshenko or whitewashing the reputation of President Yanukovich and his allies, many of whom have backgrounds in organised crime.

A humanitarian gesture

The four-month long Euromaidan began in protest at President Yanukovich's decision to abandon European integration. The new president now has the opportunity to offer immediate proof of his genuine commitment to European values by showing Ukraine is turning the page of political repression, and freeing all remaining political prisoners. There is no more deserving candidate for this humanitarian gesture than Vasyl Danyliv.

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