

Official PR campaign sought to present Ukrainian oligarch Julia Tymoshenko as martyr

By Marianne Arens
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A group surrounding Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician Lothar de Maizière and the *Bild* newspaper collaborated closely with a PR firm and party colleagues of Julia Tymoshenko in 2011 to boost the image of the Ukrainian nationalist and multibillionaire, and free her from prison. This was revealed in an article by journalist Sven Becker in *Der Spiegel* on December 19.

Julia Tymoshenko, 55, also known as the “gas princess,” enriched herself fabulously during the capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, when the Soviet energy sector was dismantled. In the “Orange revolution” of 2004, she became prime minister, but was replaced barely eight months later. She was re-elected to the post of prime minister two years later. She then fell from power in February 2010, after losing the presidential election to Victor Yanukovitch.

At the end of 2011, a Ukrainian court convicted Tymoshenko for abuse of power while in office in connection with Ukrainian-Russian gas deals and sentenced her to seven years in prison. She confronted further charges, including tax evasion, corruption and bribing officials. That more than politically motivated charges against Tymoshenko were involved is shown by the fact that former Ukrainian president Pavlo Lasarenko, who promoted Tymoshenko as his protégé during her rise in the 1990s, was sentenced to nine years in jail in the US in 2006.

In spite of this, as the *Spiegel* article shows, high-ranking politicians, up to and including German chancellor Angela Merkel, engaged in a campaign for Tymoshenko’s release. Becker writes, “The campaign for Tymoshenko is a textbook case of lobby work in Berlin, it shows how power brokers in the city seek to influence the media and politics.”

Current Ukrainian defence minister Arsen Avakov, at the time a member of Tymoshenko’s “All-Ukrainian Fatherland” party, allegedly seized the initiative. He hired the lobbying firm German PR and Consulting Group (GPRC) for the campaign. The owners of the firm were Konstantin Palovko and Igor Pobereschski, who had previously also worked for the authoritarian president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev.

Der Spiegel 1 has apparently accessed wide-ranging

correspondence from this firm. According to these documents, the firm Investment Italia, which belongs to Avakov, transferred “the sum of €250,000 to an account at Berlin’s Kommerzbank” on December 20, 2011, and promised to follow up with a further transfer of €250,000. The PR firm was given the task of securing the Tymoshenko case prominent coverage in the German media.

The *Bild* newspaper responded first. It published an interview on December 12, 2011, with her daughter, Yevgenia, entitled “My mother will die if nobody helps her!” The PR firm cynically calculated the impact of this “trendy subject” and “sympathetic tone in the media.” Countless media outlets, including public broadcaster ARD’s *Morgenmagazin*, adopted Yevgenia’s melodramatic appeal.

As *Der Spiegel* remarks, “the reputation of Julia Tymoshenko [was]...not always a good one.” But this drawback was overcome by winning senior German politicians to the campaign. Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician Lothar de Maizière was the first to be engaged. He had been a member of the CDU block party in the German Democratic Republic (DDR) since 1956, and was the last prime minister of the country, with Angela Merkel as deputy government spokeswoman.

When it emerged after the reunification of Germany that de Maizière had worked for years under the codename “Czerni” as an informant for state security forces, his CDU career suffered badly. But he is well connected. His cousin is Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière, and his uncle is General Ulrich de Maizière, who served as inspector-general of the Bundeswehr (German army).

Lothar de Maizière thus took on the task of developing important contacts for Tymoshenko. He established contact, for example, with Berlin’s Charité hospital. The plan involved renowned German doctors who were to visit Julia Tymoshenko in Ukraine, declare her “unfit for imprisonment,” and demand her transfer to Germany. The Chancellor’s Office supported the trip, and Lothar de Maizière led talks with the Ukrainian state prosecutor’s office to secure Tymoshenko’s right to leave the country.

Der Spiegel cites an e-mail from the PR firm, detailing the planned course of the doctors' trip. "The doctors arrive, they state that Julia Tymoshenko is seriously ill—and nothing else." The politicians and journalists would then draw their own conclusions. This was precisely what happened. Charitè head Karl M. Einhäupl travelled with one of his best orthopedic doctors to Kharkiv, visited Tymoshenko in the institution where she was detained and declared to the world that the imprisoned politician was "seriously ill."

Spiegel journalist Becker commented, "There is no indication at any point in the documents that the diagnoses were inaccurate. But the consequences for the political environment were enormous." The Tymoshenko case became so prominent that, as GPRC head Palovko noted in March 2012, it had become "an inseparable part of the agenda at all discussions between Kiev and the EU, between Kiev and Berlin."

An increasing number of senior politicians took up the campaign. In Ukraine, Tymoshenko's supporters were invited to the German embassy in Kiev. During the European football championships in 2012, Green Party EU Parliament deputies Rebecca Harms and Werner Schulz visited Tymoshenko in Kharkiv prison. The Council of Europe sent a delegation to her. Several EU foreign ministers called in an appeal published in the *New York Times* for Tymoshenko's release.

Even German chancellor Angela Merkel welcomed Tymoshenko's daughter Yevgenia for talks in Berlin. A short time later, German president Joachim Gauck went so far as to cancel a planned trip to Ukraine because the prominent prisoner claimed she was being tortured and began a hunger strike.

The report in *Der Spiegel* also shows how willingly these politicians became involved in the campaign to free Julia Tymoshenko. However, it does not deal with the background of the case. Leading German politicians were not simply willing to be involved, but had their own interests in using the Tymoshenko case to advance their plans for Ukraine.

Both the German and US governments pursued the goal of detaching Ukraine from Russia's sphere of influence and bringing it under the control of the Western powers. To this end, corrupt oligarchs, fascist bands and ultra-right nationalist forces were utilised. With her political unscrupulousness and talent for making an impact in the media, Tymoshenko's populist appeals were well suited for this purpose.

Already in June 2011, before Tymoshenko's internment, the CDU-aligned Konrad Adenauer Foundation pointed to her considerable potential as a propagandist. "Julia Tymoshenko clearly understands very well to direct herself on the stage of the trial in court and potential prison sentence. A mobilisation of dissatisfied citizens certainly seems possible."

With the support of the Maidan coup of February 2014, the German government implemented the goal it had announced earlier of desiring to play a greater role in Europe and the world corresponding to Germany's size and influence. The German

government worked closely with the right-wing forces that overthrew elected president Victor Yanukovitch, and supported the rise of Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who led Tymoshenko's Fatherland Party at the time, to the post of prime minister.

Julia Tymoshenko was also freed in February 2014 and incited the Maidan protests with hate-filled tirades against Russia. She played a considerable part in determining the right-wing course of the new government. Several members of her Fatherland Party took over important ministries. Tymoshenko's earlier companion, the chocolate king Petro Poroshenko, another multimillionaire oligarch who also owns shipyard, textile and machine building companies, became the president of Ukraine.

But Tymoshenko rapidly fell from favour once again. Ahead of the parliamentary election in October 2014, several leading members left her Fatherland Party and founded the People's Front under Yatsenyuk's leadership. This party became the largest in parliament, with 22 percent of the vote, while Tymoshenko's Fatherland Party won less than 6 percent. Tymoshenko has sought to win back the lost ground ever since by presenting herself as a particularly fanatical advocate of the war against the pro-Russian separatists in the country's east.

Almost two years ago, a segment of a telephone conversation between Tymoshenko and her confidant Nestor Schufritsch surfaced in which she stated she was "ready to hold a pistol and shoot that bastard in the head," with reference to Russian president Vladimir Putin. Responding to Schufritsch's question of how to deal with the "8 million Russians on Ukrainian territory," Tymoshenko said they had to be "struck with nuclear weapons."

These hate-filled tirades show the real views of the woman who received support in public and behind the scenes from many leading German politicians, who presented her as a "democrat."

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