

## **Lazarenko sentence hailed victory over corruption**

Kyiv Post

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August 30, 2006

KYIV (AP) – Ukrainian analysts and politicians on Aug. 26 hailed the sentence handed down to former Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko in the United States as a victory over corruption, but lamented that Ukrainian authorities have not done enough to tackle the problem.

Lazarenko, who was widely accused of corruption during his stint as prime minister in 1996-1997, was sentenced Aug. 25 in a federal court in San Francisco to nine years in prison and \$10 million in fines for money laundering, wire fraud and extortion.

"The role of U.S. justice turned out positive – Ukraine has not had court hearings of the kind," said political analyst Mykhailo Pohrebinsky. "It has a symbolic meaning: corruption can be punishable – even if not in Ukraine but outside."

Lazarenko fled to the United States in 1999, after being stripped of his immunity as an MP and served with an arrest warrant at home. It was just before former President Leonid Kuchma won re-election. Instead of giving Lazarenko refuge, the U.S. government arrested and tried him in an effort to show that the United States must not be used as a safe haven for dirty money.

Ukrainian authorities have long maintained that Lazarenko used his time as prime minister to siphon huge profits from the distribution of natural gas in Ukraine.

Yehor Khmelko, a businessman in the capital, Kyiv, said Lazarenko's fate was less the result of his financial dealings than of political missteps.

"He made money like many other state employees in Ukraine. But he had bad luck: he entered a conflict with Kuchma during the presidential campaign," Khmelko said.

Defense attorneys said the prosecution was politically motivated, and that political foes withheld evidence that could have exonerated Lazarenko.

"He shouldn't have fled Ukraine," Khmelko said. "All those who made huge money by state-scale fraud are in power now."

President Viktor Yushchenko, the Western-leaning reformer who came to power following the 2004 street protests dubbed the Orange Revolution, has pledged to fight corruption as one of his top priorities.

But many Ukrainians have become disappointed with Yushchenko amid infighting and allegations of corruption and incompetence in his entourage.

Lawmaker Serhiy Teryokhin said Lazarenko got what he deserved. However, he said it was strange that "it's the United States who punishes for crimes committed in Ukraine."

The sentence was half of the maximum sought by prosecutors, who said Lazarenko misused the premier's office to get rich through business schemes.

Lazarenko has claimed his multimillion-dollar fortune was earned legitimately at a time when his country, emerging from the Soviet Union's collapse, had a lawless free-market economy.

In a comment reflecting a lack of confidence in justice systems that is common in the former Soviet Union, schoolteacher Valentyna Dobra expressed doubt that Lazarenko would serve the sentence.

"He will pay his way out of it, no doubt. He has stolen enough money to pay years of appeals, enjoying his villa at the seashore," she said.

Convicted in June 2004, Lazarenko has been under house arrest at an undisclosed location in the San Francisco Bay Area on \$86 million bail. A defense attorney said the conviction will be appealed.