

Putin Compares Khodorkovsky to Madoff

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Thursday fueled new speculation about a personal vendetta against jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, saying the businessman belongs in jail and comparing him to disgraced U.S. financier Bernard Madoff.

Putin's scathing remarks, made during his annual call-in show, came ahead of a verdict in the second trial of Khodorkovsky and his business associate Platon Lebedev, prompting their lawyers to accuse the prime minister of putting pressure on the judge.

"A thief must sit in jail," Putin said about Khodorkovsky, quoting a line made famous by singer-songwriter Vladimir Vysotsky in the classic Soviet film, "The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed" (1979).

Incidentally, Vysotsky's character, a police officer, says the line after framing a pickpocket to detain him.

Speaking about Khodorkovsky's case, Putin brought up Madoff, who was sentenced to 150

years in a U.S. prison last year for cheating thousands of investors out of about \$20 billion in the biggest Ponzi scheme in the country's history.

Putin said Madoff was jailed “for a similar crime in the United States,” but added that Russia's legal system “looks a lot more liberal.”

He also reiterated accusations made during last year's call-in show, when he called Khodorkovsky a murderer even though the businessman has never been charged with the crime. He said the conviction of former Yukos security chief Alexei Pichugin on murder charges indicated that Yukos management had at least ordered killings, if not carried them out themselves.

Khodorkovsky and Lebedev, currently serving eight-year sentences on fraud and tax evasion charges, face up to six more years in jail if convicted of stealing 218 million tons of oil worth \$27 billion. A verdict in their case, which was to have been announced Wednesday, was postponed until Dec. 27 without explanation.

Khodorkovsky's supporters say the changes are punishment for the businessman's political and commercial ambitions that put him at odds with Putin.

Defense lawyers complained Thursday that Putin had unfairly pronounced Khodorkovsky guilty ahead of the verdict, constituting a breach of presumption of innocence, and said they were considering an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

“Putin, by directly referring to the current charges, is saying that we must proceed from the assumption that Khodorkovsky's guilt has been proved in court — even while the judge is still deliberating,” Khodorkovsky's lawyer Vadim Klyuvgant said in a statement sent to The Moscow Times.

Another lawyer, Karina Moskalenko, said Putin's remarks would result in a “guilty verdict and the absence of an independent trial,” Interfax reported.

Speaking after the conference, Putin denied the accusations by Khodorkovsky's lawyers, saying he was referring to the previous case against the businessman, not the new trial, Interfax reported.

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