

Judge's Aide Who Criticized Khodorkovsky Verdict Quits

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An aide to the judge who sentenced former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky to six more years in prison stepped down Monday, weeks after saying the verdict was dictated by higher-level members of the judiciary.

Natalya Vasilyeva, aide to Khamovnichesky District Court Judge Viktor Danilkin, said last month that the verdict he read out was not written by him, reinforcing the suspicions of Kremlin critics that pressure had been put on the judge.

"Natalya Vasilyeva, who returned from her sick leave today, filed a letter of resignation that has been approved," said Milentina Kapustkina, the court's spokeswoman.

Kapustkina said the resignation letter was approved by the court's acting chairman because Danilkin started a two-week vacation Monday. Earlier, Danilkin told state-owned Channel One television that he "wouldn't like to meet" Vasilyeva.

Vasilyeva's lawyer Irina Khrunova said her client decided to quit because of "the negative

attitude of her colleagues toward her," adding that Vasilyeva was not considering taking up any jobs at this point.

Khodorkovsky, in jail since 2003, was sentenced in December last year to stay behind bars until 2017, after what his supporters said was a politically motivated trial.

Vasilyeva, who also acted as a spokeswoman for the Khamovnichesky court during the trial, told Gazeta.ru last month that the verdict Danilkin read out in late December was written not by him, but by judges from the Moscow City Court, a federal appeals court.

She did not reveal the names of any judges or other sources.

Danilkin immediately denied Vasilyeva's claim and indicated he might sue her for libel over the remark, but has so far not done so. Moscow City Court spokeswoman Anna Usachyova called the claims a provocation aimed at overturning the court's decision.

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