

Laughter Greeted Khodorkovsky Delay

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The Moscow City Court postponed on Tuesday an appeal over the sentence of jailed tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky — a decision that his supporters described as a face-saving measure for President Dmitry Medvedev ahead of a major news conference.

The courtroom, packed with journalists, observers and supporters of Khodorkovsky and his fellow defendant, Platon Lebedev, erupted in laughter when Judge Vladimir Usov entered and solemnly announced a weeklong delay in the trial. Even court marshals failed to suppress smiles.

Usov cited the need to study "sizable complaints" filed by the defense. But lawyers and relatives of Khodorkovsky said this was only an arbitrary pretext.

Medvedev is throwing a much-anticipated news conference on Wednesday. The Kremlin has not specified the topic, but some said the delay in Khodorkovsky's appeal was needed to ensure that the president would not be asked about the trial, which is widely considered punishment by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for the businessman's political and commercial

ambitions.

"We had expected that it would be postponed because the president is giving a news conference tomorrow," Khodorkovsky's mother, Marina, said outside the courtroom.

Yury Shmidt, one of Khodorkovsky's lawyers, said he felt a sense of déjà vu, recalling a similar postponement in December when the verdict in the case was rescheduled ahead of Putin's annual call-in show. Khodorkovsky and Lebedev, jailed in 2005, had their sentences extended until 2017 two weeks after the show.

"Someone felt the need to schedule the hearing right before Medvedev's news conference, but then certain more powerful forces decided to put it off," said Vadim Klyuvgant, Khodorkovsky's lead defense lawyer. He did not elaborate.

Two prosecutors who attended the hearing did not comment on the delay.

Marina Khodorkovskaya said she had little hope that the appeal would overturn the December verdict. "Until the power changes in the country, what can we expect?" she said sadly.

Meanwhile, Khodorkovsky struck back Tuesday, [asking](#) the Investigative Committee to open a case into district Judge Viktor Danilkin, who handed down the verdict in December, and the prosecutors and investigators involved in the case.

He cited allegations by Danilkin's former aide Natalya Vasilyeva, who said in February that the verdict had been imposed on the judge by the Moscow City Court, [Khodorkovsky.ru](#) reported. The Investigative Committee did not comment on the request Tuesday.

A group of Khodorkovsky supporters handed out leaflets outside the courtroom calling for the businessman to be nominated as a 2012 presidential candidate. The campaign's web site, [Khodorkovsky-President.ru](#), boasted more than 300 signatures on Tuesday afternoon, with signees ranging from businessmen to pensioners.

By law, convicted criminals cannot run for office. Khodorkovsky's representatives have not commented on the initiative, but Khodorkovsky has said that, if freed, he would prefer to stay away from politics.

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