

Khodorkovsky Says Putin Should Exit

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If Prime Minister Vladimir Putin remains at Russia's helm, hopes for reform will be extinguished and the country's brightest people will emigrate in droves, jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky said.

"The hopes for internal reform of the current system of power would disappear," Khodorkovsky said in a written reply to a question asking what would happen if Putin returned to the Kremlin or remained paramount leader.

"Emigration of socially active and intellectual Russians would accelerate," Khodorkovsky said from Prison Colony No. 7 in the town of Segezha, near the Finnish border.

Reuters submitted dozens of questions to Khodorkovsky through associates, and he returned written answers last week. He said no one had influenced his answers, although he did express concern that his answers could provoke reprisals.

"I am not scared for my life, but I do not exclude that there are grounds for such fears," he said.

Putin has compared Khodorkovsky to U.S. gangster Al Capone and hinted that he was behind a series of murders, accusations Khodorkovsky's lawyers say are ridiculous.

Khodorkovsky declined to write replies on several questions about President Dmitry Medvedev but forecast turmoil in Russia sometime after 2015.

When asked whether the 2012 presidential election would be fair, he answered that the question needed to be rephrased.

"The real question is: Will the elections appear fair enough so that the legitimacy of the president is sufficient when the crisis comes? The depth and essence of the crisis, I cannot predict, but it is inevitable soon after 2015," he said.

He said the ruling elite was increasingly dependent on oil revenues and if oil prices did not keep rising, the Kremlin could face unrest in the regions similar to a workers' protest in the Leningrad region town of Pikalyovo during the 2008 economic crisis.

Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, was arrested in 2003 after falling foul of the Kremlin under then-President Putin, and Yukos was crippled with massive back tax claims and then sold off by the state.

Yukos's management and shareholders have brought a case in the European Court of Human Rights demanding \$100 billion from Russia for crushing the company. A decision is due on Sept. 20.

Khodorkovsky blamed Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin for orchestrating the attack on Yukos.

"He is the instigator and inspiration for an orgy of state raids that, after destroying Yukos, spread over the entire country," he said.

Sechin has justified Rosneft's purchase of Yukos assets, saying it paid a fair price and that Yukos has been proved to be involved in murders, extortion and tax evasion.

Khodorkovsky dismissed speculation he would seek revenge.

"Forgive? I doubt it," he said. "But spend time on revenge? I am too pragmatic."

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