

Yukos Prosecutors Seek Mild Sentence

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Former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, second from left, being escorted to a Moscow court Thursday. Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, is serving an 8-year prison sentence on tax evasion charges **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

Prosecutors think former Yukos owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky should be convicted of embezzlement but suggested leniency because of legislative changes, they said Thursday as Russia's longest-lasting trial entered a new phase.

"Analysis of the evidence presented before the court makes it possible to claim that despite the suspects' denial of their guilt it has been fully proven," prosecutor Gulchekhra Ibragimova said at a hearing at Moscow's Khamovnichesky District Court, Interfax reported.

But she said the prosecution would request a milder sentence for Khodorkovsky and his business partner Platon Lebedev, on trial for the same charges, citing amendments to the law on economic crimes introduced by President Dmitry Medvedev. She did not elaborate on the prison terms the prosecution would seek.

The maximum punishment for embezzlement was cut to 10 years from 15 under Medvedev's amendments. Earlier reports said Khodorkovsky and Lebedev, who are already serving jail time on 2005 convictions for fraud and tax evasion, face up to 22 1/2 years in prison on the new charges of stealing \$30 billion in oil.

Khodorkovsky's supporters say the trial, which has dragged on for 18 months, is politically motivated.

The court finished examining the prosecutors' evidence in late September. Now the prosecution and the defense are to present their version of the case before the court, with the four-member team for the state to go first.

Lawyers for Khodorkovsky and Lebedev said they would not comment on details of the prosecutors' statements until they finish presenting their point of view, but dismissed the accusations altogether.

"They [prosecutors] have been lying since 2003. They continue the way they started," Vadim Klyuvgant, a lawyer for Khodorkovsky, told reporters as he was leaving the courtroom, Interfax reported.

The prosecutors expect their statement to last three more days, Interfax reported. Lawyers for Khodorkovsky and Lebedev said they would request some time after that to prepare their reply.

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