

Khodorkovsky Faces Verdict

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A judge will start reading the verdict on Monday in jailed former tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky's second trial, which has shaped up as a test of Russia's ruling tandem and the Kremlin's will for reform ahead of a 2012 vote.

Once Russia's richest man and head of its former biggest oil producer, the now defunct Yukos, Khodorkovsky is nearing the end of an eight-year sentence imposed in a fraud and tax-evasion trial that shaped Vladimir Putin's 2000-2008 presidency.

Prosecutors say he stole \$27 billion in oil from Yukos subsidiaries through pricing schemes and want him sentenced to six more years in prison. His lawyers dismiss the charges as an absurd, politically motivated pretext to keep him behind bars.

The verdict and the sentence, which many suspect will be decided in the Kremlin, will be widely seen as a sign of whether President Dmitry Medvedev has the will -- and the clout -- to free a man whose imprisonment is a symbol of Putin's rule.

Putin, Russia's most powerful politician, dominates what officials call a ruling tandem with Medvedev even though as prime minister, he is subordinate to the protégé he steered into the

presidency in 2008.

Both men say they will decide together who will run for president in 2012 as the Kremlin's shoo-in candidate, but many Russians suspect it is Putin who will make the choice.

Justice System

Medvedev has championed a progressive Russia underpinned by the rule of law, and said improving a justice system marred by corruption and political influence is a crucial step.

But with little progress visible, Russians who support those goals fear his talk amounts to little more than window-dressing for Putin's more restrictive policies and his continued rule. A guilty verdict for Khodorkovsky would reinforce those doubts.

A sentence of six more years would keep him in jail until late 2017, close to the end of the next president's six-year term, clouding Medvedev's promises of the rule of law if he remains in the Kremlin.

Khodorkovsky's wife Inna told Russia's Snob magazine on Sunday that she is sure her husband will remain in prison until at least 2012.

"My husband will stay in prison till 2012, that's for sure. And who knows what will happen after that? No one," she said in the online version of the edition.

Khodorkovsky, 47, fell afoul of the Kremlin during Putin's first term after he aired corruption allegations, challenged the state's control over exports of Russian oil and quietly funded opposition parties.

After his arrest in 2003, Yukos was bankrupted by back-tax claims and its assets sold off, most ending up in state hands, deepening Western concerns about property rights and the rule of law in Russia under Putin.

A sense of personal rivalry between Putin and Khodorkovsky has persisted. In televised comments on Dec 16, Putin suggested Khodorkovsky had been involved in killings, said his economic crimes had been proven in court and that "a thief must be in jail."

Putin later insisted he was talking about Khodorkovsky's existing conviction, not the current trial.

But Khodorkovsky's lawyers accused Putin of exerting influence and Medvedev signaled his disapproval, saying in a nationally televised interview on Friday that no official has the right to comment before a verdict is reached.

It could take Judge Viktor Danilkin days or weeks to read out the verdict in the trial of Khodorkovsky and his business partner Platon Lebedev, possibly leaving the sentence unclear until after the end of Russia's winter holidays on January 10.

He had been scheduled to begin on December 15, but a terse postponement notice was taped to the courthouse door that day, fuelling suspicion that the Kremlin wanted to decrease global attention by delaying the verdict until the holiday season.

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