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Picking Out the Biggest Fraudster in the Room

By The Moscow Times

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As Prime Minister Vladimir Putin sees it, Mikhail Khodorkovsky is a fraudster on par with U.S. financier Bernard Madoff, who was jailed for 150 years after admitting to fleecing investors in the largest Ponzi scheme in history. Putin, who compared Khodorkovsky to Madoff during his annual call-in show last month, no doubt would like to see the former Yukos CEO locked up for 150 years as well.

If Putin wants to talk about fraudsters and justice, he should take a look at Russia's own Madoff — and consider the punishment meted out in that case.

Financier Sergei Mavrodi defrauded millions of people with his MMM investment vehicle, which captivated the public's imagination in its 1990s heyday before Mavrodi drove it into bankruptcy.

In comparison, Khodorkovsky, prosecutors say, defrauded the state through Yukos, which the

government drove into bankruptcy in 2006.

Mavrodi dabbled in politics, winning election to the State Duma in 1994 and using his parliamentary immunity from prosecution to exploit the voters he was supposed to represent.

Khodorkovsky supported small opposition parties during the Duma elections in 2003.

Mavrodi went on the run for six years after declaring MMM bankrupt in 1997.

Khodorkovsky stayed at the helm of Yukos as the authorities investigated his activities, even as his colleagues were arrested or fled abroad.

Police found Mavrodi holed up in a Moscow apartment in 2003.

Khodorkovsky was detained at gunpoint on his private jet at the Novosibirsk airport in 2003.

Despite evidence that Mavrodi had robbed millions of people, including impoverished pensioners and the disabled, prosecutors settled for a court conviction that he had defrauded only 10,000 investors of $4.3 million.

Despite widespread concerns of selective justice, prosecutors fought for the toughest possible sentence and won a court ruling that Khodorkovsky and his business partner Platon Lebedev had defrauded the government of about $620 million in taxes and penalties.

Mavrodi was sentenced to 4 1/2 years in prison for fraud. Tax evasion charges were considered but not filed.

Khodorkovsky got eight years for fraud and tax evasion.

Mavrodi served his full sentence and walked out of prison in 2007.

That same year, prosecutors filed new charges against Khodorkovsky for embezzlement and money laundering, which resulted in a conviction on Dec. 30 and six more years in prison.

Mavrodi this week unveiled MMM-2011, a new pyramid scheme that offers 20 percent monthly returns to ordinary investors and 30 percent to retirees and the disabled. The authorities say MMM-2011 is completely legal.

Khodorkovsky is waiting behind bars for a court to consider his appeal of the latest sentence. The authorities have signaled that new charges and a third trial could be looming.

Mavrodi angered millions of ordinary people.

Khodorkovsky angered Putin.

Who deserves 150 years?

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