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At Davos, Medvedev Defends Yukos Trial

By Alexandra Odynova

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Medvedev holding closed-door talks with corporate leaders Wednesday at the World Economic Forum in Davos. **Dmitry Astakhov**

President Dmitry Medvedev has compared jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky to the mastermind of the biggest Ponzi scheme in U.S. history in an apparent attempt to present the Yukos case as triumph of justice and highlight the ruling tandem's unity.

“An investor, Russian or foreign, should observe the law, otherwise they can get a jail term like it happened with Khodorkovsky and Madoff,” Medvedev told Bloomberg Television at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Bernard Madoff was sentenced to 150 years in prison in 2009 for organizing a Ponzi scheme worth $18 billion. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin also compared him to Khodorkovsky during a televised call-in show in mid-December, shortly before a Moscow court added six years to Khodorkovsky's previous sentence at a second trial.

Medvedev also said Wednesday that he did not wish to weigh in on the Khodorkovsky case

because it would be an “interference with justice.”

He said he would not grant Khodorkovsky a presidential pardon — as supporters have sought — because it would mean that the Russian judicial system was so flawed that “you could ask the president to change the verdict.”

Medvedev's attempts to highlight the legal rather than the political implications of the Khodorkovsky case were echoed by Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, who told reporters in Davos on Wednesday that the Yukos case had helped set the rules for doing business in Russia.

“Killers and swindlers are jailed, the mess is ended, and there are rules of the game,” Sechin said, Vedomosti reported. “Business transparency has been increased.”

Medvedev has echoed Putin in the past, but the timing of this week's message shows that he is determined to "demonstrate the team policy" between him and Putin ahead of a 2012 presidential election that neither has indicated who might run yet, said Alexei Makarkin, an analyst with the Center for Political Technologies.

"Medvedev had to react and show that they are consolidated," Makarkin said by telephone. "It is also linked to the upcoming elections, because he signals that they stay together and will be ready to make their choice when needed."

But the decision to conjure up Madoff is disadvantageous for Medvedev because he showed he is not his own man, said Lilia Shevtsova, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

“He proved that he is a carbon copy of Putin,” she said.

Khodorkovsky's chief lawyer, Vadim Klyuvgant, declined to comment on Medvedev's remarks Thursday, saying he had not seen the whole interview. But another member of Khodorkovsky's legal team, Yury Shmidt, said on Ekho Moskvy radio that the Madoff comparison highlighted the ruling tandem's “uniform position on the case.”

Still, Shmidt said, he had expected “a more elusive reply.”

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