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Assistant: Judge Was Pressured on Yukos

By Alexandra Odynova

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Judge Viktor Danilkin, seen here reading out a verdict in the trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, had to report to the Moscow City Court on the inner workings of the Yukos trial, according to his assistant

The Moscow judge who sentenced ex-Yukos head Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his business partner to jail in December was pressured and did not even write the verdict he read, the judge's assistant said.

Analysts and Khodorkovsky's supporters alike have long been calling the trial politically motivated, but this is the first time a court employee has added to the allegations.

The report could prompt a reinvestigation of the case, which is pending appeal, but it is unclear whether that will actually happen. The judge in the case, Viktor Danilkin, was quick to dismiss the story as "slander."

Natalya Vasilyeva, Danilkin's assistant and spokeswoman during the 20-month-long trial,

made her sensational statement in an interview with Gazeta.ru released Monday.

The text of the verdict that extended the sentences of Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev, already serving eight-year prison terms on economic charges, until 2017, was written by Danilkin's superiors, she said.

"The verdict was brought from the Moscow City Court, I know it for sure," Vasilyeva said. "It's absolutely obvious."

She said she knows the names of the judges who penned the text, but preferred to withhold them for now.

Danilkin had to report to the Moscow City Court on the inner workings of the trial, Vasilyeva said, adding that the outcome of "political cases" is usually decided in advance, and a judge who refuses to go along with it usually faces dismissal.

Danilkin is likely to be sacked anyway because his superiors are unhappy with his handling of the case, which he allowed to drag on for too long, Vasilyeva, who claimed to have worked with the judge and his court circle on a daily basis during the trial, said in the interview.

She also expressed sympathy for her boss, saying constant pressure has made him "glum, depressed and sad."

The experience also disillusioned her, which was what prompted her to report the story to the media despite the fact that she was likely to lose her job over the scandal, Vasilyeva said.

"I wanted to become a judge, but the law has turned into a fairy tale for me," she said. "I realized that it's not true that a judge is subject only to the law. A judge obeys higher authorities."

Court officials vehemently denied the report.

Danilkin himself said Vasilyeva's report was false and did not rule out suing her, Interfax reported.

Moscow City Court spokeswoman Anna Usachyova called the interview a "provocation before the appeal hearing," the date of which is not set.

"I'm sure that Vasilyeva will backtrack on her comments: There have been such cases before. Witnesses testify and later say they were forced to," Usachyova said.

Usachyova also said Vasilyeva has already filed a resignation request, but Danilkin's aide said later that she has only gone on vacation, not quit her job, RIA-Novosti reported.

Supreme Court spokesman Pavel Odintsov declined to comment, saying the court will not comment on Khodorkovsky's case as it may have to review the case in the future, Interfax said.

Human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov said a criminal case may be opened against Vasilyeva now, though no investigation was reported Monday.

Experts not related to the case said Vasilyeva's statement should result in a full-scale inquiry.

"In theory, the prosecutors should organize a check or even order investigators to look into it," lawyer Robert Zinovyev told The Moscow Times, adding that a lot depends on the judge's further actions.

Ponomaryov said President Dmitry Medvedev must order an inquiry.

The Kremlin kept silent on the matter Monday, though Medvedev has indirectly rebuked Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who said two weeks ahead of the December verdict that Khodorkovsky is a "thief" and "belongs in jail," a move slammed by the defense as pressure on the judge.

Most critics call the Yukos case Putin's personal vendetta against Khodorkovsky, who displayed political ambitions before his arrest in 2003.

Rights activists planned to petition the Prosecutor General's Office to demand the opening of a criminal case over obstruction of justice in the case, Ponomaryov said.

"Though in fact, the pressure was exerted by the Prosecutor General's Office itself," he added skeptically.

Both Ponomaryov and Zinovyev called Vasilyeva's report about pressure on Danilkin credible.

"If there were a special order from Moscow City Court head [Olga] Yegorova, he would have to obey," Zinovyev said.

But it could not be ruled out completely that the sensational interview was a trick orchestrated by the authorities in order to "discredit the defense," Ponomaryov said.

Vadim Klyuvgant, lead defense lawyer for Khodorkovsky, said he hoped that Vasilyeva's statement "was a sincere human impulse, and not a provocation, many of which took place during the trial."

Zinovyev said Vasilyeva's report can be used by the defense as extra evidence during the appeal. Lawyers for Khodorkovsky and Lebedev did not indicate Monday whether they were planning to do so.

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