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# Signaling Thaw, Khodorkovsky Pops Up on State TV

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State-owned NTV television broadcast a prime-time report in which jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky announced that he would seek parole, fueling speculation that the Kremlin might be edging toward a decision to free him.

NTV, which has harshly criticized Khodorkovsky in the past, showed a seemingly unbiased report about the businessman Sunday in an indication that his name was no longer taboo on state-controlled airwaves.

President Dmitry Medvedev stirred some hopes earlier this month when he said Khodorkovsky would not pose a threat to society if he were released. But a lawyer for the tycoon said Monday that he was waiting to see action, not words, from the Kremlin.

"There is one truth — the attitude toward the one whose name shouldn't be mentioned has been changing," NTV host Vadim Takmenev said in the eight-minute report on Khodorkovsky

on his "Central Television" program late Sunday.

"It's as if something has changed," Takmenev said.

The report mentioned, among other things, allegations that a judge had been pressured by his superiors into delivering a December verdict extending the prison sentences of Khodorkovsky and his business partner Platon Lebedev. It noted that former ballerina Anastasia Volochkova said in February that she had been tricked into signing an anti-Khodorkovsky letter in 2005, around the time of the businessman's first trial.

Takmenev reminded viewers about Medvedev's statement at a news conference in mid-May that Khodorkovsky "is absolutely not dangerous."

Khodorkovsky himself was interviewed for the show, answering written questions handed to him by his lawyers. He reiterated his innocence of tax evasion, fraud and other charges in the interview and announced that he would seek parole, which he is eligible for now because he has served half of his 13-year sentence.

"I refuse to accept the courts' decisions. ... But I will definitely use my right for early release," Khodorkovsky wrote.

Khodorkovsky also said the case against him was fabricated, with the host running a 2003 clip of him saying "prosecutors have run out of legal methods" to jail him.

Khodorkovsky has voiced the accusations before, including in a courtroom speech last week when the Moscow City Court rejected his appeal of the December verdict. Snippets of his speech were also shown in a Sunday evening news program on state-owned Rossia One television.

Khodorkovsky and Lebedev claim that the case is revenge by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for Khodorkovsky's political and business ambitions.

Khodorkovsky requested parole in 2008 but was denied over minor prison violations that his supporters say were fabricated as a pretext to keep him in prison.

NTV, once well-known for its critical coverage, went pro-Kremlin after its takeover in 2001 by state-owned Gazprom, and has served as a government tool amid major political decisions, including the removal of Mayor Yury Luzhkov and a crackdown on Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko last year.

Takmenev could not be reached for comment Monday, but on his Facebook page he mocked speculation that his show had been produced on the Kremlin's order.

A spokesman for the Khodorkovsky's press center, Maxim Dbar, said by telephone Monday that NTV requested the interview shortly after Khodorkovsky lost his appeal last week, but gave no further details.

Yury Shmidt, a lawyer for Khodorkovsky, confirmed that his client would seek parole soon but could not provide any details, admitting that he learned about the plan from the NTV report.

Shmidt said the report was "not bad" and "a pleasant event" but its purpose remained unclear.

"We always want to believe in positive implications, but in this case I can't judge yet," Shmidt said by telephone.

Khodorkovsky's "early release depends on a single person: you-know-who," he said, referring to Putin.

Lev Ponomaryov, a prominent human rights advocate, said the NTV report must have been "a political decision," taking into account the history of state television's "monstrous reports about Khodorkovsky."

"It must be for a reason," Ponomaryov said. "I think that there is no decision on parole yet, but at least it is being discussed at the top."

Earlier this month NTV also interviewed Alexander Kuchma, Khodorkovsky's former cellmate, but it has yet to air the footage. Kuchma, who slashed the tycoon's face while he slept in 2006, told Gazeta.ru last week that NTV director Vladimir Kulistikov personally banned Takmenev from airing the interview, in which he claims that unidentified officials paid him to attack Khodorkovsky. NTV has not commented on Kuchma's claim.

If anything, the NTV report appears well-timed. The European Court of Human Rights is scheduled to rule on Tuesday on a lawsuit filed by Khodorkovsky that says his rights were violated after his arrest in 2003.

A ruling in his favor may add to mounting criticism of the Russian government over the Yukos case. Last week, the U.S. government expressed its concern, and Amnesty International named Khodorkovsky and Lebedev prisoners of conscience.

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