

Aleksanyan, Yukos Vice President Who Had AIDS, Dead at 39

By [Andrew McChesney](#)

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Former Yukos vice president Vasily Aleksanyan, who fought a protracted legal battle with the authorities before finally being freed on bail in 2009 to seek treatment for AIDS-related illnesses, died Monday, Dozhd television reported late Monday, citing his family. He was 39.

Aleksanyan "lived like on a volcano" during his final years, said Yury Shmidt, a lawyer for former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

"I was talking with a friend of Aleksanyan's three days ago. He told me that Vasily feels absolutely fine — he can eat, he can drink," Shmidt told Izvestia. "But he lived all the time in such a state that if the slightest infection occurs, he could die in a second."

Human rights veteran Lev Ponomarev said Aleksanyan would have lived longer if the authorities had not kept him in prison for nearly three years on charges of embezzlement and tax evasion.

"Aleksanyan's death, no doubt, was hastened by the fact that he was kept in prison for a long time while he was seriously sick. He went blind in prison," Ponomarev said, Interfax reported. "We have cruel system. And people are cruel, not only the system."

He reiterated the belief of many supporters of Aleksanyan and his former boss, Khodorkovsky, that the case against Aleksanyan amounted to Kremlin punishment for Khodorkovsky's political and commercial ambitions.

Aleksanyan, who long served as Yukos' top lawyer, quit the company after Khodorkovsky's arrest in 2003 but returned in March 2006 as an executive vice president to work with Yukos' court-appointed bankruptcy manager, Eduard Rebgun. A month later, he was arrested.

A few months after his detention, Aleksanyan learned he was HIV-positive. He also began to lose eyesight in his one good eye. The other eye had been blind since a childhood accident.

Aleksanyan and his lawyers said the authorities used his illness as a bargaining chip, threatening to withhold treatment unless he agreed to testify against Khodorkovsky and his jailed business partner Platon Lebedev.

Aleksanyan's AIDS only became public knowledge in early 2008 after Prosecutor Vladimir Khomutovsky controversially revealed it during a Supreme Court hearing.

International pressure grew throughout the year to release Aleksanyan on bail for health reasons. In addition to full-blown AIDS and fading eyesight, he suffered from liver cancer, lymphoma and tuberculosis.

In December 2008, the Moscow City Court ordered his release on bail of 50 million rubles. He posted the money and was freed in January 2009.

The case against him was dropped only last year as the statute of limitations ran out.

Funeral arrangements were not immediately announced.

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