

Khodorkovsky to Be Pardoned, Putin Says

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Mikhail Khodorkovsky **Sergei Porter**

President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday that he would pardon former tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky "in the nearest future," surprising observers, including the prisoner's lawyers and family.

Khodorkovsky "has already spent more than 10 years in prison, this is a serious punishment," Putin told reporters after his annual news conference, adding that the former Yukos CEO has recently appealed to him for presidential pardon.

"He is citing humanitarian circumstances, his mother is ill, and I think this is grounds for making a decision, and a decree about his pardon will be signed in the nearest future," Putin said.

Putin's announcement of the appeal for pardon seemed to come as a surprise to

Khodorkovsky's lawyers both in Russia and in the U.S., who said they had no immediate information about such a petition.

"I know nothing right now, I am now making calls and finding out," his lawyer Yelena Lukyanova said, Dozhd television reported.

Another member of the defense team, Vadim Klyuvgant, said he was unaware of any request for pardon, RIA Novosti reported.

"He hasn't appealed, and lately we've had no information of anybody appealing on his behalf," Klyuvgant said. "We don't have any information about that, though during all those years there have been requests for his pardon from various people."

Khodorkovsky's U.S.-based lawyer Maria Logan said she also no such information, Bloomberg reported.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Interfax of the application, "If it asks for clemency, it means that he acknowledged guilt."

Khodorkovsky.ru, the official website of the tycoon and his fellow prisoner and business partner Platon Lebedev, said Thursday evening that "Until his legal team can meet with Mikhail Khodorkovsky, it cannot be commented on whether a request on a pardon was made, by whom and for what reasons."

The prisoner's son Pavel, who often speaks to media about his father, echoed an inability to talk about the news and said on his Twitter account, "To people who are trying to get in touch with me today: I apologize for being unavailable, I can't comment until I speak with my dad."

Earlier during Thursday's press conference, Putin said that a new criminal case against Khodorkovsky, a possibility floated in recent media reports, was unlikely.

"As far as a third case is concerned ... I see few prospects of this happening," Putin told the annual news conference. "I hear talk of this but at the moment I don't see any threats."

Khodorkovsky was first arrested in 2003 and then sentenced in 2005 to nine years in prison for embezzlement and money laundering. The total term was later increased to 13 years after a second criminal case in 2010, before being reduced to 11 years by the Moscow City Court last December. The former oil tycoon was set to be released in August 2014.

Peskov said that Lebedev, who is scheduled to be released in May, had not applied for a pardon.

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