

Khodorkovsky Speech Aired in St. Pete Hotel Despite Chaos

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Khodorkovsky at a recent European Parliament debate on rights in Russia.

It seems St. Petersburg authorities on Sunday did not want a Holiday Inn conference room to show a speech by one of President Vladimir Putin's most prominent and vocal critics: Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

The conference area was searched for drugs, police attempted to evacuate the building because of a bomb threat, sirens wailed and then the whole building's electricity was cut off — though the event's organizers were prepared with batteries.

Once Russia's richest man before being imprisoned for about a decade on allegedly politically tinged charges, Khodorkovsky gave the speech on Sunday to a group of supporters via videolink from Europe, calling for a new political regime in Russia.

"Our goal is to demonstrate that there is an alternative to the current regime," said

Khodorkovsky, who from self-imposed exile in Europe recently announced that he would be ready to serve as Russia's next president. "It is inevitable that the regime will fall due to the crisis. The result must be democratic Russia," he said Sunday, garnering applause.

A few minutes before the speech was scheduled to begin, policemen ordered the hotel to be evacuated due to a bomb threat. Earlier that day, when two organizers were preparing the equipment to broadcast the speech, several policemen came looking for drugs in the conference hall.

But while sirens wailed as police attempted to evacuate the building, several dozen city lawmakers and opposition activists slipped into the conference room.

Policemen came into the room periodically throughout the speech and asked the audience to leave. But as officers added that they would not forcefully evict anyone, the audience stayed until the end.

Khodorkovsky did not comment on what was happening in the hotel, instead focusing on achieving regime change in Russia through democratic elections.

Opposition members in the audience asked what would be the best tactic for them to get into power. While Khodorkovsky promoted peaceful means, some in the audience argued for a more aggressive approach.

The conference lasted for about an hour and a half and ended when the batteries ran out. According to news site Fontanka.ru, several groups of tourists were unable to check in at the hotel due to the disruptions surrounding the meeting.

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