

A Year After Being Freed, Khodorkovsky Associate Still Trapped in Russia

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Platon Lebedev

Platon Lebedev, the one-time business partner of former Yukos owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky, said Wednesday that more than a year since he was released from prison he still has no foreign passport and cannot leave Russia.

"I need a foreign passport," Lebedev told a press conference in Moscow.

"If they give me a foreign passport I will be able to look at my [financial] opportunities and proposals," he said, adding that he wanted to work in the "international investment business."

Lebedev, 58, walked free from a penal colony in northwestern Russia on Jan. 24 last year after serving ten years behind bars on fraud and tax evasion convictions. He and his supporters have always maintained his case was politically motivated and tied a state grab for the now

defunct Yukos, once Russia's largest oil firm.

The former billionaire's public appearance Wednesday was his first since a brief television interview he gave in the hours immediately after his release.

Lebedev said that the Russian authorities have refused to issue him with a passport because of his alleged liability for an outstanding 17 billion ruble (\$276 million) tax claim against Yukos. Lebedev described the suit as "spurious."

The 17 billion ruble claim is the same reason Khodorkovsky, released a month before Lebedev after being pardoned by President Vladimir Putin, has cited for not returning to Russia — he fears he would not be allowed to leave again.

Lebedev describes Khodorkovsky as more like a brother than a business partner, but the two men have not met face-to-face since being freed. Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, flew to Berlin after his release, and now lives in Switzerland.

"I sometimes speak to Khodorkovsky by phone," said Lebedev. "I try to follow his public statements."

Lebedev said that he would not be attending a rally planned for March 1 by Russia's opposition movement to protest against the government's response to the current economic crisis. Khodorkovsky is one of the organizers of the event.

"I don't do politics ... it's not for me," he said.

Lebedev told reporters that the current crisis was "nothing terrible" compared to the 1990s and that many of the problems were imagined.

He said he agreed with many of Khodorkovsky's public positions, but not all of them, and declined to be drawn out on who he thought would make a good Russian president. "Khodorkovsky is a good crisis manager but he is not a person for the long haul," Lebedev said.

Lebedev appeared relaxed throughout his public appearance in a small theater by the Moskva River, and only raised his voice once when speaking about "idiots" he said were representing Russia in ongoing court cases brought by Yukos shareholders against the Russian state in European arbitration courts.

"They are directly deceiving the European court," he said.

Former Yukos shareholders appear to be on the verge of winning court rulings that would allow them to seize Russian state property abroad as payment for the up to \$140 billion they are owed.

Yukos was dismantled in what was widely seen as political punishment for Khodorkovsky challenging Putin's authority. Much of Yukos was absorbed by state-owned Rosneft, now the largest publicly traded oil company in the world.

Khodorkovsky was arrested on a Siberian runway in 2003 three months after Lebedev was

detained while being treated in hospital. The two men were sentenced to nine years in prison in 2005 and, five years later, were convicted together in a second case and had their sentences lengthened.

Lebedev was released four months before his sentence was due to end, on the eve of Russia's Winter Olympics, after a ruling by Russia's Supreme Court.

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