The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Mikhail Khodorkovsky Sets Conditions for His Return to Russia

By Peter Spinella

March 25, 2015



Russian exile, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, delivers a speech at Chatham House in central London, Feb. 26.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the self-exiled Russian tycoon-turned-opposition figure who spent 10 years in jail, says he will only return to Russia when it becomes dangerous for the powers-that-be to throw him back in jail.

"I think this situation will arise soon enough," he said via video link at a conference in Russia's third-largest city, Novosibirsk, the Interfax news agency reported Wednesday.

"Unfortunately, it's not just a choice between working as a free man outside Russia or working as a free man inside Russia. It's a choice between working as a free man outside Russia or working at the very least under house arrest," he was quoted as saying at the conference late Tuesday.

"They probably wouldn't play the kind of games with me as they have with [opposition

activist] Alexei Navalny, and I'd end up back in a prison cell," he said, adding that he is not afraid to go back to jail, but "it is harder to work there."

Navalny was kept under house arrest for most of last year ahead of an embezzlement trial that ended in him being given a suspended sentence.

Khodorkovsky, a former oil tycoon, was Russia's richest man before being imprisoned for about a decade on fraud charges that his supporters say were cooked up as revenge for his political activities. He was freed upon a personal pardon by President Vladimir Putin in late 2013 and promptly left the country. He was granted residency in Switzerland soon after.

The conference at which he was speaking was mired in scandal earlier this week when a technician responsible for setting up the video link was detained in what Khodorkovsky supporters called a "provocation."

The technician, Leonid Yuldashev, said he was attacked near his hotel a day before the conference was scheduled to take place by a man who then accused Yuldashev of trying to steal his cell phone, the Khodorkovsky-initiated pro-democracy group Open Russia said.

Yuldashev was detained by police and kept overnight in jail, Open Russia said in a statement on its website.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/03/25/mikhail-khodorkovsky-sets-conditions-for-his-return-to-russia-a45139