

Russia: Khodorkovsky's unexpected defenders

On 14 February, independent Russian media published a recording of an interview with Natalia Vasilyeva, the spokesperson for the local court in the Khamovniki district of Moscow, in which she describes the political pressure exerted on the judge who conducted the second trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The trial has been criticised by several public figures who had previously supported the government. Such statements may be a sign that fear of an increase in the state's repressive behaviour is growing among some of the Russian elite.

Vasilyev's statement included the assertion that the verdict read by the judge which sentenced Khodorkovsky to 14 years of imprisonment was written in the Moscow City Court, which had previously earned a reputation for giving verdicts favourable to the Kremlin. The Khodorkovsky case was discussed by the presidential Human Rights Council, which is preparing the legal evaluation of the businessman's second trial. A member of the Council, the political scientist Sergei Karaganov (who had previously supported Putin) appealed to President Medvedev for a pardon for Khodorkovsky. A similar position has been taken by a number of well-known representatives of Russian show business, who in 2005 signed the so-called 'List of Fifty' (supporting the allegations against Khodorkovsky). Many of them have now distanced themselves from that decision, claiming that they were operating under pressure, or were deceived.

Khodorkovsky's second trial aroused controversy from the beginning because of the bias shown by the court and other state bodies. This time, the businessman is being defended by people who had previously demonstrated their loyalty to the authorities. It may be that these circles are disturbed at the government's increasingly repressive nature. Their voices can also be seen as lending indirect support to Dmitri Medvedev (who is considered a more liberal representative of the ruling elite than Putin) in the context of his efforts to win re-election. <JR>