

Mikhail Khodorkovsky is found guilty again

On 27 December, a Moscow court found Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former president and major shareholder of the oil company Yukos, and his business partner, Platon Lebedev, guilty of the misappropriation of 218 million tonnes of oil. The court will announce its sentence by 31 December, and can impose 14 years of imprisonment as the maximum penalty. The sentence is likely to be harsh. The trial has adversely affected Russia's international image, but the Kremlin sees Khodorkovsky as a dangerous opponent, who has to be kept in prison.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev were first sentenced to 9 years in prison in May 2005 on charges of tax evasion and large-scale embezzlement (several months later the penalty was reduced to 8 years). Their second trial started in March 2009, when they faced charges of misappropriating 350 million tonnes of oil produced by Yukos (the amount was later reduced to 218 million tonnes). The opposition, human rights activists in Russia and abroad and many lawyers have claimed from the very beginning that the trial is politically motivated and that the charges are absurd. Over the past few years, Khodorkovsky has become an opposition symbol in Russia. He has often expressed his opinion on key issues, criticising the government. The Kremlin fears releasing the former head of Yukos from prison because this could cause political complications before the presidential elections in 2012 and later in 2018. During a TV conversation with the Russian public on 16 December, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin commented on Khodorkovsky's trial by saying that "a thief should be kept in prison", which means that it has already been decided that Khodorkovsky will stay in prison in the coming years. <WojK>