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"We haven't had that since Stalin"

Interview. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, once the richest Russian but a political prisoner since 2003, talks about the politicized jurisdiction in Russia and his hopes for the reform-minded President Dimitri Medvedev.

profil: In one interview you said, "Prison makes people free." Did you really mean that?

Khodorkovsky: I am an active person. At the moment I am very limited in what I can do. But I work a lot. Work was always a means to self-realization for me. Making money was secondary.

profil: You seem remarkably fit after almost six years behind bars. What do you do for your mental and physical health?

Khodorkovsky: Prison isn't exactly beneficial for one's health. But I refuse to allow prison to grind me into the ground. After my arrest I quit smoking. I use every opportunity to get fresh air. I kept to that in Chita, the penal camp, even when it was minus 40 degrees outside. I also do gymnastics. The most important thing is personal discipline.

profil: You have been imprisoned in Moscow for months now, because the second trial against you on charges of money laundering and fraud is being held here. Why is this new trial being held, which your defense attorney finds to have been prepared perfunctorily?

Khodorkovsky: The new trial is more damaging to those in power, as it is for the whole country. A group of greedy civil servants are behind the new trial, because they only got a few crumbs from the table after the Yukos company was destroyed. Crumbs at a value of about 3 billion dollars, however. These people want to convince those in power that setting me free would strengthen the opposition and weaken the Kremlin. I don't know if these predators can convince the leadership. Today they have less power than they did during the first trial from 2003 to 2005. They definitely no longer act under orders from the president.

profil: You said yourself that you do not expect to get a fair trial. Your defense attorneys are still fighting with all they have, however. Do you hope for an innocent verdict despite everything?

Khodorkovsky: I will fight for my freedom. The law and truth are 100% on my side. The charges are absurd. I do not have any unfinished business with President Dimitri Medvedev, and he has no issues with me. He apparently wants to leave everything to the court. I cannot imagine that the president is so naïve and blind to the pressure being put on the court by those who want a conviction. The president promised the people independent courts. Will he make sure this promise is fulfilled? We will see.

profil: What will your success or your failure in court mean for Russia?

Khodorkovsky: The result of the trial will show how jurisdiction functions in Russia. This will have effects on the investment climate. Lawyers as well as the citizens affected are following the trial to find out what is permitted in Russia today, and what is not. After the first conviction against me, hostile takeovers of companies increased greatly with the blessings of those in power. This "uncontrolled growth" is meanwhile seen as an acute problem by the president, the head of government and the population, in fact it is recognized as a threat to the economy. This genie was let out of the bottle by those who destroyed Yukos. The consequences of the second trial could be just as awful. To send people to court with absurd accusations - in fact twice - has not been seen here since Stalin.

profil: Have you been following how Roman Abramovich and other oligarchs are doing?

Khodorkovsky: A life of luxury was never attractive for me. Meanwhile I think about much more interesting and important topics.

profil: Until recently you were punished with isolation for every interview you gave from your cell. Nothing happened the last few times. Do you know why?

Khodorkovsky: The last punishment caught up with me after my written dialog with the Russian author Boris Akunin was published in the magazine "Esquire" in October, 2008. A court later determined the punishment to be illegal. That could be why I have been allowed to walk away "unscathed" from that type of "misstep."

profil: In your conversation with Akunin you counted President Medvedev among those who actively promoted "fair rules of play" in 2003. Medvedev himself said that now in another situation he does not see any political component to your case. Is Medvedev an independent political personality?

Khodorkovsky: No political scientist can say how power is shared out between Medvedev and Putin. It seems to me as though Dmitri Medvedev is an independent politician with clear ideas about how a state should be run. At the same time he is completely loyal to Putin.

profil: Your mother Marina Khodorkovskaya said in a profil interview last year that "Micha will only be released when Putin lets him out." Is she right?

Khodorkovsky: Putin apparently wishes to forget our case and has not gotten involved in this trial. I have basically already served the eight years of imprisonment to which I was sentenced during his presidency. However, there is almost never clemency given in cases where politics and corruption are involved, not even at the district court. Clemency would definitely send a signal of liberalization to the West and to Russia. It would be good for an economy hoping for innovation. The country is suffering because there is no fair justice system. The court system must be reformed. Trust and respect for the courts must be built up. There is no better opportunity to do this than in our trial.

profil: Could you show regret to obtain clemency?

Khodorkovsky: I am innocent. I cannot show regret for infractions I have not done.

profil: Might the Kremlin let you go in order to get bonus points from with US President Barak Obama?

Khodorkovsky: I am thankful to all foreign politicians, journalists and famous personalities for their support. It is important in many ways. I think that my case will be decided here within Russia, however.

profil: How do you evaluate the consequences of the economic crisis for Russia? Could the crisis lead to political reform?

Khodorkovsky: The economic crisis forced those in power to reconsider their political model for the first time. It has become clear that the Russian model of administration has been depleted. We cannot develop ourselves if the system does not change. If the social expenditures must be increased constantly, for example, to secure the power structures. The "years of plenty" are over. Now the fight between individual influential groups begins. That could seriously endanger the political and social stability in Russia. There are three possibilities: either the "social screws" are tightened, which would cost those in power their popularity, or the investment climate is stimulated with innovative measures. The third variant would be an iron curtain with state terror, the repetition of the Soviet experience in the Thirties and in the Fifties. I consider this option to be unrealistic. The Kremlin and the Russian elite have neither the political, policing or psychological requirements. They have no desire to become global pariahs. The elites in power in Russia are only slowly becoming aware that the high oil and gas prices are not a panacea, however. I still hope for something better.

profil: Someday you will be free. What do you want to do then? Go into politics?

Khodorkovsky: I owe my family a lot of time and attention. I want to clear these debts when I am free.

Interview: Tessa Szyzkowitz, Andrej Iwanowski

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, 46, built up the oil company Yukos in the Nineties during the privatizations of Soviet fortunes, very quickly and not always considerably. In 2003 the chemist and once-functionary of Komsomol, the youth organization of the CPSU, was the richest man in Russia. Under President Boris Yeltsin Khodorkovsky built up an immense, increasingly transparent corporate empire. Khodorkovsky is one of a group of oligarchs that had considerable influence on the Kremlin. Relationships got more difficult under Vladimir Putin, Yeltsin's replacement. Khodorkovsky did not hold to Putin's rules, and among other things he financed opposition political parties and organizations. In October 2003 Khodorkovsky was arrested from his private jet and in 2005 sentenced to eight years in prison for fraud, money laundering and founding a criminal organization. A second trial has been ongoing since March, 2009, involving him and his partner Platon Levedev. Yukos was destroyed and the assets integrated into firms connected with the state. Khodorkovsky, whom profil had met personally just before his arrest, answered the questions posed by profil in writing this time.