

The New York Times

The Opinion Pages

I.H.T. Op-Ed Contributor

'The Fate of Every Citizen Is Being Decided'

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Published: November 2, 2010

Excerpts from the final statement by the former chairman of the Yukos oil company at the conclusion on Monday of his 20-month trial in Moscow on charges of embezzling oil from his own company. Translated by Stephan Lang.

Looking back, I can recall October 2003, my last day of freedom. A few weeks after my arrest, I was informed that President Putin had decided I would “slurp gruel” for eight years. Then it was hard to believe. Seven years have passed. Seven years — a long stretch of time, especially incarcerated. All of us have had time to reassess and rethink many things. ...

I don't want to return to the legal side of the case. Everything's been clear for a long time. Nobody is seriously waiting for an admission of guilt from me. It is hardly likely that somebody today would believe me if I were to say that I really did steal all the oil produced by my company. Neither does anybody believe that an acquittal in the Yukos case is possible in a Moscow court.

I want to talk to you about hope. Hope — the most important thing in life.

I remember the end of the 1980s; I was 25 then. Our country lived on the hope of freedom, hope that we would be able to achieve happiness for ourselves and for our children. In some ways, it did materialize, in others it did not. The responsibility for why this hope was not fully realized, and not by everyone, probably lies with our entire generation, myself included.

I remember too the end of the last decade and the beginning of the current one. By then I was 35. We were building the best oil company in Russia. We were putting up sports complexes and cultural centers, laying roads and re-surveying and developing dozens of new fields; we started development of the East Siberian reserves and were introducing new technologies. In short, we were doing all the things that [the government-owned] Rosneft, which has taken possession of Yukos, is so proud of today.

Thanks to a significant increase in oil production — a result also of our successes — the country was able to take advantage of favorable oil prices. We could hope that the period of convulsions and unrest was behind us at last, that with the stability

achieved through great effort and sacrifice we would be able to peacefully build a new life and a great country.

Alas, this hope also has yet to be justified. Stability has come to look like stagnation. Society has stopped in its tracks.

But hope still lives. It lives on even here, in the Khamovnichesky courtroom, when I am already just this side of 50 years old.

With the coming of a new president (more than two years have passed), hope appeared once again for many of my fellow citizens — hope that Russia could still become a modern country with a developed civil society, free of arbitrary officials, free of corruption, free of unfairness and lawlessness.

Clearly this cannot happen by itself or in one day. But to pretend that we are developing, while we are merely standing in one place or sliding backwards, is no longer possible. The situation is impossible and dangerous for the country.

It is impossible to reconcile oneself with the notion that people who call themselves patriots so tenaciously resist any change that affects their feeding trough or their ability to get away with anything. Yet it is precisely the sabotage of reforms that is depriving our country of prospects. This is not patriotism, but hypocrisy. ...

I think all of us understand full well that the significance of our trial extends far beyond the scope of my fate and Platon's, [Platon Lebedev, Khodorkovsky's former associate and codefendant] and even the fates of all those who have guiltlessly suffered in the massacre of Yukos — those I found myself unable to protect, but whom I remember every day.

What must be going through the minds of the entrepreneur, or the senior manager, or simply an ordinary educated, creative person, watching our trial and knowing that its result is absolutely predictable? The obvious conclusion is chilling in its stark simplicity: It is that the siloviki [powerful ministers] can do anything. ...

A country that tolerates a situation in which the siloviki bureaucracy holds tens and even hundreds of thousands of talented entrepreneurs, managers and ordinary people in jail in its own interests, instead of and together with criminals, this is a sick country. A state that destroys its best companies; a country that holds its own citizens in contempt, trusting only the bureaucracy and the special services, is a sick state. ...

I will not be exaggerating if I say that millions of eyes throughout Russia and the world are watching this trial. They are watching with the hope that Russia will still become a country of freedom and law, where the law is above the bureaucrat. Where supporting opposition parties is not a cause for reprisals. Where special services protect the people and the law, and not the bureaucracy from the people and the law. Where human rights no longer depend on the mood of the czar, good or

evil. Where, on the contrary, power truly depends on the citizens and the court, only on law and God. Call this conscience, if you prefer.

I believe this will be. I am not a perfect person, but I am a person with an idea. For me, as for anybody, it is hard to live in jail, and I do not want to die there. But if I have to, I will. The things I believe in are worth dying for. I think I have proved this.

And you, my opponents? What do you believe in? That the bosses are always right? Do you believe in money? In the impunity of “the system”?

Your Honor! Much more than our two fates are in your hands. Here and now the fate of every citizen of our country is being decided: of those who do not intend to become victims of police lawlessness on the streets of Moscow and Chita, St. Petersburg and Tomsk or other cities and settlements; of those who have set up a business, built a house, achieved a measure of success and want to pass it on to their children — not to raiders in uniform — and, finally, of those who want to honorably carry out their jobs for a fair wage, not expecting to be fired at any moment by corrupt bosses.

This is not about me and Platon — at any rate, not only about us. It is about hope for many citizens of Russia. About hope that tomorrow the court will be able to protect their rights, if yet another bureaucrat-official gets it into his head to brazenly and demonstratively violate these rights. ...

Everybody understands that your verdict in this case — whatever it will be — is going to become part of the history of Russia. It will shape Russia for future generation. The names of these prosecutors and judges will remain in history, like the names that have remained in history after the infamous Soviet trials.

Your Honor, I can imagine perfectly well that this must not be very easy at all for you, perhaps even frightening, and I wish you courage!