

Transcript of the international press conference held by Leonid Nevzlin in Israel on May 31, 2005, in response to the sentencing of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev

Mr. Nevzlin: Good evening ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. The Khodorkovsky verdict is the beginning of the end of Putin. Putin has put Mikhail in jail a few months before the election in 2004.

Ladies and gentlemen thank you for coming. I will try and speak Russian. I am a little bit excited and I will have to check with my notes from time to time. First of all I will have to say that there was no miracle.

The kind investigator, the kind [unintelligible] has become the Judge of the one man standing, the President of Russia, Mr. Putin. This short trial, this badly directed short trial needed to scare everybody in Russia and to give every potential opponent to Mr. Putin a lesson. My friends are in prison because they behaved as free people in a free world, in a Democratic country that ... in a Russian Federation.

I know that we always behaved according to the law. We supported Democratic organization and always earned our money in legal ways. We have done everything for the Democracy, liberal democracy of the West to appear in Russia. This case is a clear case of political persecution and Putin has achieved the goal he was trying to attain, demolish his political opponent, demolish a person who had the will, who dared to challenge the bureaucratic politics in Russia.

All the charges and tax evasion are absurd and any court, any normal independent court, not Russian court would reject this. These charges are absurd, even because of the amount of money claimed from the persons and from the people. It's more than over 5 billion dollars fine, or a 5 million dollars fine was given to Khodorkovsky.

Putin shows that all the ideological opponents will be punished in the same way. And no one has the right to interfere with the process of politics in civil society and no one can finance the opposition parties. Everyone understands the real sense of the verdict. Khodorkovsky will not be able now to prevent Putin from being re-elected in 2008. It doesn't matter to Putin or to his proxy.

The arrest of Khodorkovsky opened the way to victory of Putin in 2004. Of course destroying the opposition parties in the Parliamentary elections of 2004 and this verdict now will have to provide a victory for Putin in 2008 or to

Putin's proxy. This is all I call Putin's victory.

Khodorkovsky of course was representing a clear political threat. And that's why Vladimir Putin, who uses all the system that he has in his hands, the court, the bureaucracy, the mass-media, has given an order to destroy his opponent and send him to jail until this time.

The West on numerous occasions noticed that Khodorkovsky is a political prisoner. It was marked in the report of Parliamentary Assembly of Europe. It was marked in the decision of the Bar Magistrate Court in England. It was in the report of Amnesty International and it was marked in the report of the ex-Minister of Justice of Germany, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger that critiqued the Russian justice system and said that the trial of Khodorkovsky is unjust.

There is no opposition left in Russia today. The only opposition is now represented by those who had the time to leave Russia or to flee Russia. So that these few Oligarchs, these few people who remained in tact because they left Russia, people who continue to live in Russia and loyal to Regime in Russia and loyal to the projects of the Regime, no one interferes with them making money. Because the selective struggle is conducted not against people but against the Democracy otherwise everyone would be in prison.

They have destroyed the source of financing of opposition. They have destroyed the civil society. They have destroyed for support of NGOs, what Khodorkovsky has been doing for a long time. I think that this is not the end. I think this the beginning and we have not lost the war. We have lost the battle on the enemy territory.

I think that globally we will win, we will win the battle and I am sure that Russia will be a Democratic State. Should Khodorkovsky remain in jail or be free, Russia's future depends on it, whether Russia will be Democratic or it will go to dictatorship and Putin is now standing on the threshold of dictatorship. And now he will be in the same line with his friends, Lukashenko and Karimov on the post-Soviet territory.

This kind of Putin's Russia is very dangerous for the whole world and I will call upon western countries to unite and to work for liberating Khodorkovsky and for freeing Russia, saving Russia. Today this is one of the symptoms of the maladies that is threatening the whole world. I am scared that not everyone understands that and the real sense of the verdict is that Khodorkovsky is not going to be able to prevent Putin from being reelected in 2008. No one will be able to prevent Putin from being reelected in 2008.

That is why I think that today all Democratic ways are good for me to fight against this Regime. I don't think that this Regime is legitimate, because it came to power in a pseudo democratic way. It came to power with all the mass media being under the control of Kremlin. That is why all the methods in the framework of Democratic procedure will be justified in replacing this Regime and there are no grounds to pity these people and there is no reason to be soft with these people for me.

And I can promise my friends liberty for Khodorkovsky, that we will do everything, everything to take them out of there.

That is all in general. I would like to say a few words also about the people themselves because I didn't speak about that before because it didn't serve a purpose. I have known Lebedev for 24 years. After the institute I came to the organization in which you want as finance controller. The organization worked in a lot of countries in the world and in Russia in the field of geology.

Lebedev is the kind of person that every management always trusted, especially the management of geology of Soviet Union. He was the only controller of the accountant management of a lot of organizations around the world. He is very clever. He is a flawless person that would never take a penny that doesn't belong to him. Knowing him for 24 years I can say that he has become a very close friend of mine and it hurts me a lot to see him there.

As for Khodorkovsky, as for Misha, it's very hard for me to say, it's very difficult. I have known him for 18 years already. In autumn it will be 18 years that I have known him. I think he's a golden person for the whole world and for Russia. He possesses this strategic thinking, I would say a scientific thinker. He is a very good manager. He is a very good organizer. I think not only that there are very few of them in Russia; I think he was the only one and he now became incapable because of persecution from the Russian Regime. That's all. Please ask your questions.

Question: Would you say that in this case President Vladimir Putin wasn't prosecuted as a judge? OK. I'll ask again. Would you say that in this case, the Khodorkovsky case, that President Putin was the prosecutor and the judge?

Answer: Yes. I have already noticed that. Not only is he a prosecutor and a judge, I think he is the one who kills, he is the one- Whatever was programmed by him came true. Mr. Kolosnikov, the Deputy Prosecutor said: Khodorkovsky will stay in prison for 10 years. Unfortunately we can't give him more time in prison. That was in the beginning, when Khodorkovsky was arrested. The procuracy has asked for 10 years. The court has given 9 years in prison.

You know that it doesn't mean anything, because Khodorkovsky is due to face new charges. I just think they want to destroy him, maybe kill him if you want. And of course he is everything and the name to this phenomena is Putin.

Question: You said that you are going to fight Putin's Regime by all the Democratic ways available. You also said that with the verdict of Khodorkovsky their position was deprived of the sources of financing. Do you want to become this source?

Answer: I already took part in presidential elections when I financed partly the campaign of Irina Khakamada. I supported financially some other democratic procedures. I know that those who today are ready to be a real opposition are risking their lives and their freedom. They can only come, these Oligarchs that are free, free because they left Russia and they went abroad.

I already said that I think that there is no real other position to Putin's Regime. Automatically it means that I will support financially those who are ready to, those who are capable of fighting this Regime and not those who will try to find their place and compromises with Kremlin. Specifically there is nothing to talk about right now. There is no opposition in Russia but there is a hope for opposition.

When I am talking about Democratic methods of fighting I meant all the Democratic ways of fighting, except those who are illegitimate. I just wanted to say that I am not going to fight with Putin by illegitimate methods.

Question: Don't you think that putting the Khodorkovsky's case in a political sphere is too much? Don't you think that there is an economic reason to that? Someone just wanted to steal YUKOS Company?

Answer: There is an answer in your question, because that's a political reason. If someone wants to steal YUKOS, steal a company for himself that's a political persecution in a normal society. That's first. Second, someone is trying to steal YUKOS and someone is doing it very successfully. I think that this someone is Putin. Or I should believe in something that this is done in Russia behind his back. I allow myself not to believe that.

Speaking about political persecution, we are talking now about the best Russian company and the best Russian manager. That's why I think this tremendous attention to this case, to this fabricated false charges is very, is so huge. I was told that today there was a press conference in the White House and there was a question about Khodorkovsky, asked from Mr. Bush and there was an answer from Bush.

I do not call upon people to fight a regime. I am just speaking about things I am going to do. I am trying to live without calling upon people. I am sure that there will be a success. The question is, when the success will come. I told this once, I'll tell this again, there is no other way for Russia but Democratic. Russia is going to be Democratic anyway. The price is huge for me because it's a personal price.

But I think Putin handed out the verdict to himself, handing this verdict to Khodorkovsky. You will see that because of this tremendous cruelty towards my friends a lot of people who don't want to live under this Regime will raise their head. It's of course young people - right wing young people, left wing young people. There will be more protests on the streets in Russia, because the powers will have nothing to explain:

Why this selective cruelty? Why him? Why not Abramovich for instance?

Well, you don't have good data. Abramovich has met with Putin two days ago about re-electing himself as the Governor of Chukotka.

Yes. I think that will happen in any case. I think that today is not the place and the time and it will show disrespect to the people. I was going to tell about a few [unintelligible] given to Putin as a present by Abramovich. But when I wanted to speak about that the Novaya Gazeta wrote an article about that and now it's not interested. But it's not the only fact. It's not the only case. And of course we are going to speak about that.

I hope no one doubts that these people who are doing big business in Russia, and I am afraid to comment today. All the press centers of the big companies refuse to comment on the case and I cannot repeat to you what they say off the record. This is the well-known six letter Russian word.

So you know, I just want to say, they are paying a lot of money. These people are paying a lot of money both in cash and in transfers to different wings of the Administration of the President, both for political projects, both for their own safety and security, and of course we are going to talk about this.

Question: Do you have the possibility to influence Russia from Israel? Do you think that you will be able to appear in Russia in the nearest future without risk of losing your freedom?

Answer: I will start from the end. I will have this opportunity to come to Russia after the change of Regime. I am talking about the principle change of Regime. If in 2008 it's not Putin or his proxy comes to power but someone else, my influence in Russia is insubstantial. The coverage of the mass media that we

control is 1/2% and this media publicizes me without cutting the quotations.

Speaking about television, REN TV is the only channel that actually gives my quotations and there are a few radio stations and newspapers. If there are people that will be ready to build opposition then these people will change the picture and will build the influence. I am counting on the Western countries, on the Western standards, on the Western politicians and I will try and work with them as much as I can, even though I am limited in movement.

I can't complain about Western support. I am alive. I am free. I live in perfect conditions. I say what I want to say. No one limits me in any thing. No one tells me what to say or where to go. That's a big achievement and a big thank you to Israel for that, the country I am going to live in for the rest of my life.

I never expected too strong of a position from the Western countries and from the Western politicians that could have harmed them. And I understand very well that when the relations with dictatorship in Russia with a Democratic Russia will be harming these politicians in these countries then there will be more attention paid to that. What I am counting for is that Putin is going to wave his arrogance stick against some other people. This is inevitable. And this is bad, because no one wants to be dependent on unpredictable dictatorships.

Second, I do hope that the regime in Belarus will change in the closest time and then Russia will be surrounded by Democracies. Without that it will be difficult. Russia already has problems with Ukraine after the Democratic change there.

I also hope for the situations like in Germany. In this case the friendship with Putin might cost Schroeder his elections, his re-election in the next elections. Of course we want him to lose. I want Chancellor Schroeder to lose in the elections in Germany. He is friendly with Putin in spite of public opinion in Germany, because there has been tremendous support from Bundestag, from media, from public opinion in Germany.

I think the only country that is supportive that is United Kingdom. But the United Kingdom is based upon independent judicial system and the separation of powers.

Russia doesn't depend too much on foreign investors and their amount is insignificant. There is mostly investment into small portfolios that allow people to gain some money fast. Talking about strategic investments, I must say that those who invest in Russia have experience investing in the Soviet Union and when they treat Russia not as a Democratic country but as the Soviet Union then

there is no danger for the investment, because all the investments should be approved by Kremlin, as they have been in the past.

I think that the Kremlin will stand by their obligations on few big investments. I don't like this system and I think nobody likes it because this relationship should be based on market economy, independently from the powers. But this is not what happens. That's why I say that maybe the investments from British Petroleum are not threatened now in Russia.

Question: How do you see yourself as an Israeli businessman after the verdict? And second question, what is your relationship to Russian immigrants in Israel?

Answer: Between me and the community in Russia? Oh, I thought you were asking about Russia. Well, I have determined my position long before the verdict. I am not a businessman. I am just an investor. The business activities in the groups are controlled by Mr. Brudno. Mr. Brudno has accomplished one deal in Israel and he prepares another one. He has made some in Eastern Europe.

Speaking about myself, in the closest time I am going to become the head of the Board of one of the organizations. I am not going to tell you which one because it's new.

There is nothing new for me in Jewish activities. I have been the President of Russian-Jewish Congress in the year 2000 and I have been cooperating very actively with different Jewish organization all over the world. And Israel I can't hide from you that the Diaspora is my primary interest. I am not going to forget the Russian Jewish Diaspora also, because I also have a research center on Russian-Jewish History in Moscow. This is one of the nicest projects that I lead living in Israel.

I am going to devote myself mostly to Jewish community, Jewish activities.

Question: There was a practice of exchange in political prisoners in the Soviet Union. What will be a condition to exchange Lebedev and Khodorkovsky as political prisoners?

Answer: You know, I also thought about during this absurd trial a lot about this proverb: Let my People go. Unfortunately there is a lot in common in these cases, because the head of the country is an FSB Officer. Russia has for the first time such incompetence in power. I cannot find an analogue of that in the whole history of Russian Federation.

I think that the Russian Administration will never go to any kind of deal

because they will try and persistently prove that they are a Democratic country and they will try to believe that they are listened to and believed.

Question: Mr. Nevzlin, you said that when you worked in Russia and you supported opposition parties, you believed that Russia is Democratic or headed toward Democracy. What was the ground for you to believe that? Why today you think that Democracy is possible in Russia? Because Russia was never a Democratic country.

Answer: You know what? I think I can speak directly about this period because I was very well integrated in the process of building Democracy in Russia, in a few stages of this process at least. I participated in creating the Scientific Center of Creation of Youth. And then we went to cooperation.

Then here was a new banking system, and then there was a politicizing of the state companies. Then we bought the state company and then there was the result that you all know. And we created from the bankrupt, out of the bankrupt company we created the most successful, the most progressive and transparent company.

In 1991 we spent entire nights in the White House, in the House of Government in Russia, during the Putsch, near Yeltsin, near Selayv. We chose our position, risking our lives. In 1992 we have become the advisors to the Prime Minister of Russia on finance and economics and we worked for the whole year until the Government changed. We worked in the house of Government and no one asked from us to cease our entrepreneurship. That was the first Russian market Government.

In 1993 Yeltsin's position was very disputable but we still stuck with Yeltsin. We took risks. We were standing there. I was ... and in Yeltsin. In 1996 we also helped Yeltsin to be re-elected, in his campaign against Zyuganov. I think it was the right decision.

We went towards Democracy because otherwise Russia would become a Communist country again as Zyuganov would want.

We kept ourselves distant from the power, but we helped this country in everything. Khodorkovsky personally was involved in legislation activities in Russia and he was trying to move Russia into market legislation.

In 2000 I became the President of Russian-Jewish Congress. That was very risky at this time, because it was after Gusinsky. Nothing happened to me then.

A year later I left Russian-Jewish Congress and I worked in the Council of Federation, the Upper House [of parliament]. For two years I was doing international relations in the Upper House. Then I was elected as the Rector of Russian State University for the Humanities.

I have a decoration from Yeltsin for my labor for the sake of Democracy in Russia. I always knew that we were building a Democracy and I had no grounds to doubt that we were going into the right directions. This was raw. It was new, but it was going in the right direction.

We are not stained by the fact that we were helping to build an authoritarian system. Maybe we did not prevent the powers from committing some mistakes. But we were quite distant from the powers.

Question: I would like to ask another question. How the Bank Hapoalim story ended for you?

Answer: Well, this story hasn't started for me and probably it ends the same way. The Bank works very well, at least with my account. Half a year ago, seven months ago maybe, I opened an account there and since then it worked perfectly every day. It was never arrested or frozen.

A few days ago I was very surprised to find out that the old team came back to the Bank and the same people that worked at the time we opened the accounts there, still work there. The bank works very well. At least I didn't know about it from anyone but the papers.

- The End -