

EU Lawmaker: Russia Better Off Without Putin

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A senior European lawmaker harshly criticized Russia's human rights record and said the country would be better off without Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Heidi Hautala, head of the European Parliament's subcommittee on human rights, [told](#) Ekho Moskvyy radio on Friday that the living conditions of Russian prisoners amounted to a "catastrophe" and said the legal onslaught against former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky was "politically fabricated."

Hautala, wrapping up a visit that included a stop by a banned opposition rally near Moscow's Triumfal'naya Ploshchad on Aug. 31, said she was "shocked" that Putin had made a "direct call" for the police to use violence against peaceful demonstrators who take part in regular unsanctioned rallies at the end of every month with 31 days.

Putin told Kommersant in an interview published last Monday that the police would beat

unsanctioned protesters "upside the head with a truncheon."

At the Aug. 31 rally, Hautala told reporters that "Russia would be better off without Putin," BBC Russian Service [reported](#) Wednesday.

Hautala criticized Khodorkovsky's ongoing trial, saying she had seen "the prosecutor clearly exercising pressure on a witness to make him testify against Khodorkovsky under the threat of jailing [the witness]."

Khodorkovsky is serving an eight-year sentence on fraud and tax evasion charges and is now on trial on related charges that carry a sentence of up to 22 years. He maintains his innocence.

Prosecutors had no immediate comment about Hautala's criticism.

Hautala also called prison living conditions "the main catastrophe of human rights" in Russia and said the European Parliament was "closely following" the case of Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in detention last November.

The Prosecutor General's Office said Aug. 11 that more than 90 percent of prisoners in Russian prisons and pretrial detention facilities have health problems.

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