The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# The Khodorkovsky Omen

By Michael Bohm

January 10, 2011



Prime Minister Vladimir Putin sent a clear and chilling signal on Dec. 16 that the "soft autocracy" of his first decade in power will become more oppressive in his second decade.

It was on that day that Putin effectively delivered the guilty verdict in the second trial of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky during his annual call-in show — two weeks before Judge Viktor Danilkin actually found Khodorkovsky guilty of embezzlement and money laundering and added six years to his sentence, ensuring he will be locked up until 2017.

Putin's declaration that Khodorkovsky belonged in jail was eerily similar to Stalin's notorious practice of delivering a sentence and then having the court confirm it. Putin easily could have not selected the Khodorkovsky question during the call-in show and applied pressure on Danilkin in private. Instead, Putin flouted an apparent disregard for the law on national television. (Applying pressure or interfering in a trial is a violation of Article 294 of the Criminal Code.)

The Khodorkovsky verdict also dealt a serious blow to President Dmitry Medvedev — who said Dec. 24 that no top government official had a right to comment on the Khodorkovsky trial

before a verdict is reached — and to his modernization and judicial reforms.

One of the main reasons Putin still enjoys high popularity ratings is that many Russians prefer Putinism to the chaos under former President Boris Yeltsin throughout the 1990s. Against this backdrop, Putin's political model for stability comes out the clear winner.

But as memories of the 1990s slowly fade, so will this comparative advantage. Support for Putinism could erode as people balk at being forced to pay for the elite's prolonged feast in terms of low wages and pensions, substandard health care, unaffordable housing and a sharp rise in corruption and organized crime. Kushchyovskaya has become a striking symbol of how much the county has degraded under Putinism.

One reason Putin is tightening the screws is because he understands that he cannot indefinitely get away with masking growing stagnation as "stability."

Like all autocracies, Putinism is dependent on a large class of lackeys who serve the ruling elite. They argue with straight faces that Putinism is good for Russia and cynically try to justify its autocratic rule in terms of the country's "unique path and traditions." If by "tradition" they mean the country's 1,000-year tradition of autocracy, corruption and poverty — whether it be under serfdom, Soviet communism or Putinism — this is one tradition that many people would arguably like to end. Nikita Mikhalkov, Russia's top apologist for autocracy, in his October manifesto "Right and Truth" tried to package Putinism as "enlightened conservatism" and urged Russians to be subservient and loyal to "authoritative power" and to respect the law. In light of the Khodorkovsky trial, Mikhalkov's appeal to respect the law is a complete mockery.

Servility to Putinism is strikingly similar to its Soviet version. Mikhalkov has replaced his father, Sergei Mikhalkov; Kremlin ideologue Vladislav Surkov has replaced Soviet ideologue Mikhail Suslov; and Danilkin has replaced Yelena Savelyova, the illiterate judge who presided over the 1964 trial of poet Joseph Brodsky and eagerly fulfilled the state orders by sentencing him on "parasitism" charges to five years of hard labor in the Archangelsk region. In the spirit of this infamous tradition, it is no surprise that State Duma deputy and United Russia member Yevgeny Fyodorov claimed that the second Khodorkovsky sentence was a vivid example of the independence of Russia's judicial system.

This was followed by a Foreign Ministry statement in response to Western criticism about the Khodorkovsky trial. "We hope that everyone will mind his own business — at home and internationally," the ministry said.

This is a standard response from authorities who try to mask their abuses of power as "internal matters." (Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Andropov also claimed that jailing dissidents were "internal matters.") It is no surprise that a country that has so little tolerance for criticism from within the country reacts so sharply and defensively to criticism from outside the country.

In a similar fashion, during a December interview with Larry King, Putin said, "I would like to offer some advice to our [U.S.] colleagues: Don't poke your noses in our internal affairs." Putin said the same thing about U.S. officials during a June interview with French journalists: "Why do you think you have the right to criticize us? We can figure out for ourselves what is

best for us."

When Putin said "we," "ourselves" and "us," he clearly meant the ruling elite, not the people.

The Khodorkovsky trial also showed another standard characteristic of autocracies — cowardice. The verdict was postponed to Dec. 30, a day before the country shut down for the 10-day New Year's and Christmas holidays. This allowed authorities to shirk responsibility and to limit public discussion and outrage over the verdict. Moreover, in a Soviet-style attempt to downplay the ruling, the top stories on state-run television evening news programs after the verdict was announced were the death of a Boney M musician and Medvedev handing out state awards at the Kremlin. Meanwhile, the Khodorkovsky verdict was a top story in many foreign newspapers.

Entering 2011, Russia lacks any viable political alternatives to Putinism, and this seems to be exactly the way Putin wants it. Several days after the Khodorkovsky verdict was delivered, a court sentenced opposition leader Boris Nemtsov to 15 days in jail on charges of "insubordination" to police during a sanctioned Dec. 31 demonstration. By all indications, this was a preplanned government operation to provoke, humiliate and intimidate one of the country's most vocal opponents of Putin. Amnesty International has declared Nemtsov, who is being held in a cell with six other detainees, as a "prisoner of conscious." The authorities' message in this incident was clear: Think twice before you criticize Putinism.

Michael Bohm is the opinion page editor of The Moscow Times.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/01/10/the-khodorkovsky-omen-a4098