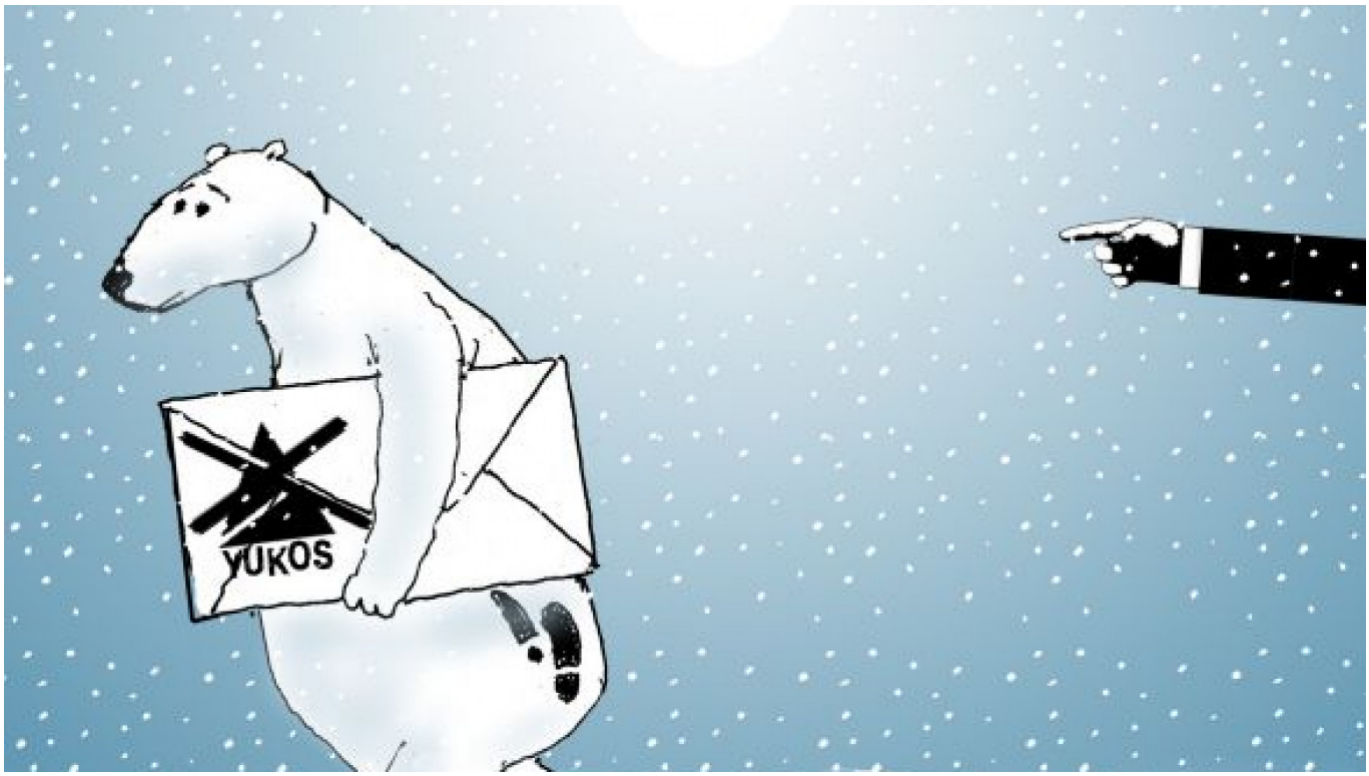
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

In the Spotlight: Backdated Apologies II

By Anna Malpas

February 10, 2011



This week, a few more showbiz stars awkwardly explained why they signed a letter backing the first jail sentence for former Yukos chief Mikhail Khodorkovsky — but did not really mean it.

In a brilliantly simple idea, Radio Liberty is asking all of the 50 public figures who five years ago signed an open letter saying Khodorkovsky's sentence was not politically motivated whether they have changed their minds.

Ballerina Anastasia Volochkova has already withdrawn her support for the letter in a slightly deranged obscenity-strewn interview.

She was followed by veteran film actress Svetlana Svetlichnaya, who flatly denied she ever signed the letter, and ice skater Irina Rodnina, who said she couldn't have signed it because she was abroad. Some have defended themselves defiantly, such as luxuriantly locked society portrait painter Nikas Safronov, who told Gazeta.ru that he signed the letter and never denies his words. "I understood that it was a political step but I think we need order," he said.

This week's unlikely dissident was Alexander Buinov, a 60-year-old pop star who likes showing off his muscles in tight black T-shirts. His patriotic hits include a song called "Special Forces."

He told the radio station that he now feels awkward about his decision to sign the letter without doing any research. "I did not have a clue about the economic and political situation. You could say there are a lot of idiots about. In this case, it was me," he said. Buinov is a member of United Russia, and his words were quite brave, since he may now miss out on invitations to patriotic concerts for police and army holidays at the Kremlin Palace.

In another turn up for the books, Vladivostok customs officers showed a surprisingly endearing side this week. A video presumably intended for their personal consumption was posted on YouTube. It shows staff letting their hair down at a party and has been viewed more than 350,000 times in two days.

A woman tosses her blond hair around as she dances on a desk, and grinning uniformed men toss each other in the air and spray a bottle of Sovietskoye Shampanskoye. One dramatically slides along the office floor on his stomach, the gold stars indicating his rank gleaming on his shoulders.

It's an almost shocking glimpse into a hidden world of customs in-jokes. And the staff look a far cry from the hard-faced types I usually see at Sheremetyevo, beadily eyeing the bulging suitcases full of undeclared Harrods shopping.

The video is set to a song about the customs service, sung to the tune of an irritating Russian R&B song, "Columbia Pictures Does Not Present." It certainly improves on the original lyrics. I liked the bit about the rather pudgy boss: "You can only get on maternity leave through him," it leers. Then there is the twinkly head of the brutally named "search department," who rubs a huge knife against his stubble.

The film was reportedly made for an office New Year's party and does look rather costly, what with hiring some models (unless that topless woman really is a customs officer) and a Rolls-Royce.

With a complete lack of imagination or sense of humor, the customs service reacted with horror to the viral hit they had on their hands — it even got shown on Channel One news, for goodness sake. They called it a "disgrace" and threatened to sack the staff involved.

But, in fact, it looks a lot like the kind of artfully warm and quirky commercials that chilly corporations spend millions concocting to improve their images. After all, what's not to love about a topless woman nibbling a customs declaration form.

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