

How Putin Turns Foes Into Fleas

By [The Moscow Times](#)

March 02, 2011

The  Moscow Times

A February ruling by Judge Tatyana Adamova of Moscow's Savyolovsky District Court must go down as among the most absurd in Russian history.

Adamova presided over the defamation case brought by opposition leaders Vladimir Ryzhkov, Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Milov against Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who in answer to the question "What do Nemtsov, Ryzhkov, Milov really want?" on his December live television call-in show said: "Money and power. ... In the '90s, they stole billions of dollars."

This is an outlandish and reckless claim that previously had never been alleged — except perhaps by a few crackpot bloggers on LiveJournal — much less proven.

It was taken as a given, of course, that Adamova would rule in favor of Putin regardless of the circumstances. But what was most bewildering was her explanation for the ruling: that Putin was speaking in general terms only and didn't really mean the three specific individuals. Thus, there were no grounds for slander, Adamova argued.

This legal reasoning has about as much credibility as the proverbial fifth-grader who claims that his dog ate his homework.

This bitter attack on the opposition was classic Putin — in one tsarist wave of his scepter on live television, he turned three prominent politicians into insignificant, faceless common nouns.

Moreover, Putin's logic is blatantly flawed. Ryzhkov, Nemtsov and Milov were never oligarchs. In addition, many of the '90s oligarchs to this day are close Putin allies. In addition, tycoon Boris Berezovsky — whom Putin lumped together with Ryzhkov, Nemtsov and Milov during the call-in show — played a key role in Putin's rise to power by convincing President Boris Yeltsin in 1999 to anoint the then-Federal Security Service director as his successor.

Adamova's ruling looks even more ridiculous when compared with a February defamation case that billionaire Gennady Timchenko, a close ally of Putin, won against Nemtsov, who was found guilty of libel for saying Timchenko was a "nobody" before Putin came to power.

In the same spirit of selective justice, Nemtsov was found guilty of libel in July in a case against billionaire Yelena Baturina, wife of former Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, for writing in his booklet "Luzhkov. Results" that "Baturina's business is not successful anywhere except in Moscow."

Not surprisingly, as soon as Luzhkov fell out of favor with the Kremlin in August, his once-friendly Moscow District Federal Arbitration Court did a complete about-face. On Oct. 20, the court overturned the July libel ruling against Nemtsov.

The best example, of course, of selective justice for political gain during Putin's decade in power was the second criminal conviction of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his business partner, Platon Lebedev.

These cases are par for the course in the country's venal legal system. They illustrate how Russia's leaders at the federal, regional and municipal levels can easily manipulate the courts using their "executive privilege" of *telefonnoye pravo* — the purported practice of dictating court decisions to judges by one phone call from the Kremlin or City Hall.

This makes a mockery out of the country's legal system and President Dmitry Medvedev's judicial reform program. It also brings new meaning to the notion of kangaroo courts.

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