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Communism Is Alive and Well

By Alexei Bayer

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The Moscow City Court last week reviewed the second trial of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his business partner Platon Lebedev. It confirmed the verdict but reduced the sentences by one year. Now they will get out of prison in 2016. The ruling comes as Amnesty International recognized the two former Yukos executives as prisoners of conscience, equating them with Soviet-era dissidents and thus drawing a direct parallel between Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's Russia and the repressive Soviet Union.

Just as both Khodorkovsky and Lebedev trials had been a sham from the outset, the latest review by the court was also complete buffoonery. Given the apparent grudge Putin holds against Khodorkovsky, it is clear that he will stay in jail on one pretext or another as long as Putin remains the country's most powerful man. But the moment Putin's rule comes to an end, Khodorkovsky will most likely be promptly released.

Meticulous attention to minute legal details against the background of grotesque miscarriage of justice is an old Soviet tradition. The show trials of the 1930s, while featuring preposterous trumped-up charges such as spying for the British, German and Japanese intelligence services

simultaneously, were also carefully staged in a vain attempt to imitate justice. Patently false evidence against millions of Stalin's victims was gathered into files and stored in police archives. Extra-judicial killings of political prisoners were carried out only with the "legal" sanction by a troika, or an ad-hoc panel of three judges.

Historians still wonder why the Soviet bureaucracy went to so much trouble trying to create a fig leaf of legality for brutal and undisguised state terror. The most likely explanation is that they had nothing better to do. In fact, under communism nobody in the Soviet Union did much productive work. It was not required. During the workday, attending Communist Party meetings, rallies and ideological education classes, as well as staging and participating in various "social" events, was far more important than working. Similarly, the creation of legal justification for Stalin's travesty of justice was typical Soviet-era smoke and mirrors, which was so crudely constructed that it never fooled anyone.

Tellingly, the only people who did any work at all were labor camp inmates during Stalinist terror. They built canals, hydroelectric dams and apartments. Once Stalin died and his repressions came to an end in the early 1950s, the Soviet economy began to rot.

Communism promised to give everything for free to every member of society. Since no one worked very hard, there wasn't much to go around. The country's post-Soviet state capitalism model is different. There are no freebies for all any more. Now, in place of the communist ideology, Russia has oil. Oil comes out of the ground for free and petrodollars flow to the state, which distributes them generously to its faithful servants, the bureaucrats. The rest have to work.

The number of bureaucrats in Putin's Russia has expanded dramatically, and despite promises on the part of the government to check the growth of their salaries, the State Statistics Service reported recently that they continue to expand.

In many ways, communism is still alive and well in Russia. Today's "Communist functionaries" are the country's huge army of bureaucrats who have no responsibilities and feel no pressure to do anything, except engage in pointless activities such as confirming sham verdicts of political trials. In Russian, this is called pouring water from one empty cup into another.

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

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