

Tandem Would Gain If Khodorkovsky Set Free

By [Vladimir Frolov](#)

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Russia's political stars could not be better aligned for the early release of former Yukos owners Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev from prison.

Both President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin are looking for ways to disabuse themselves of the political costs that the continued imprisonment of both men presents to their decision on the presidential transition of 2012.

Their respective motives are different, but their equally strong interests in finally putting this nasty matter to rest coincide at this particular moment in Russian history.

Political risks for Putin and Medvedev are minimal. The European Court of Human Rights has just dismissed Khodorkovsky's suit that his arrest in 2003 was politically motivated.

Although the two men have not admitted their guilt, even if they would be released early on

parole, they would still remain on record as convicted criminals, not political prisoners of conscience. And a criminal conviction would make them ineligible for running in an election. Moreover, the conditions of the parole are likely to restrict their active involvement in politics and media exposure.

For Medvedev, the release of the two prisoners would help underline his independent role and strengthen his centerpiece agenda of judicial reform and the creation of a more business-friendly climate. Were he to run for president in 2012, he would no longer have a political albatross around his neck that keeps reminding everyone of his dependency on his senior tandem partner.

For Putin, releasing Khodorkovsky and Lebedev now is equally appealing. This would send a powerful signal at home and abroad that Putin's return to the Kremlin, were he to opt for it, would be nothing to fear. In an instant, it would help defang his liberal and Western critics and would allow him to enter the presidential race without the political baggage of his earlier rule and win new friends in the West.

Since this would be a purely legal decision taken on Medvedev's watch, Putin would save face and incur no political cost. If he wanted to play dirty, he could even disavow the release as Medvedev's pandering to the oligarchs, liberals and the West. For Putin, this would be a show of uncontested, almost royal primacy, not weakness.

Irrespective of the political factors at play, it would be better — not only for Khodorkovsky and Lebedev and their families, but for the country at large — if both men were set free.

Vladimir Frolov is president of LEFF Group, a government-relations and PR company.

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