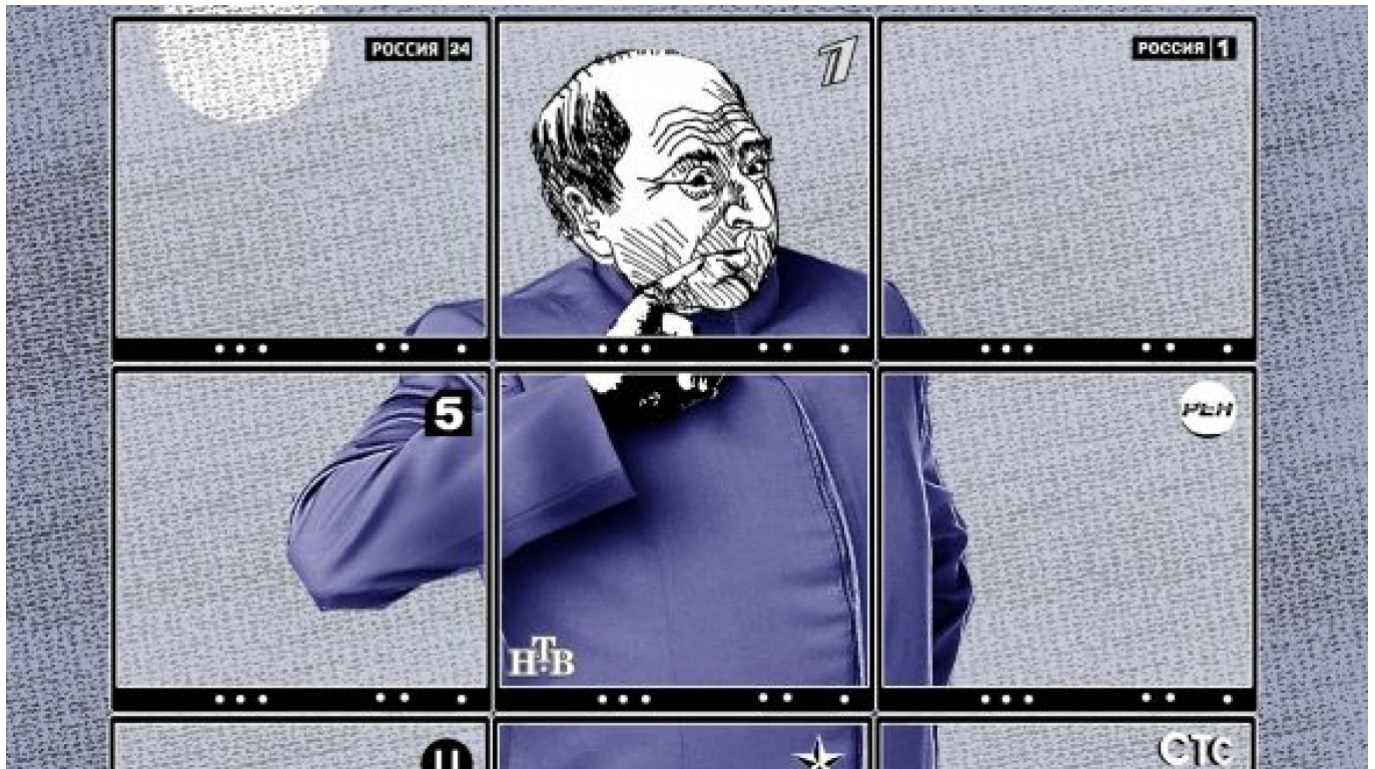


Why Putin Will Miss Berezovsky

By [Vladimir Ryzhkov](#)

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Boris Berezovsky's death threw Russia's state-controlled television channels into a whirlwind of activity. The disgraced oligarch, political outcast and marginalized self-exile who long ago left Russia suddenly dominated every news program and talk show on prime time. The death of the legendary, mythical figure turned out to be just as useful to the Kremlin as had been his life both before and after President Vladimir Putin forced him out of Russia.

Such was Berezovsky's fate — to always be useful to both Putin and President Boris Yeltsin. He helped Yeltsin retain power and unwittingly helped Putin politically when the Kremlin used its propaganda machine to turn Berezovsky into the devil incarnate.

Kremlin-friendly television blamed Berezovsky for some of Russia's worst crimes over the past 20 years. For example, we were told that he was the mastermind behind the 1990s corrupt privatization program, created the country's oligarchical system, ordered the murders of journalists Vlad Listyev and Anna Politkovskaya and Federal Security Service officer Alexander Litvinenko, financed the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, supported Islamic extremists in Russia and attempted to overthrow Putin's regime.

State propaganda has magnified Berezovsky into an arch villain of terrifying proportions, depicting him as an all-powerful strategist and kingmaker, the author of infinitely complex and successful political schemes and a person who was willing to stab the country in the back at any moment. One newspaper headline read: "Berezovsky Found Dead in His Country House. What Was He Up to This Time?"

At the same time, however, Kremlin propaganda conveniently overlooked the more embarrassing elements of the Berezovsky story, such as the fact that Putin had a long, friendly acquaintance with him throughout the 1990s and that Berezovsky pushed Yeltsin to choose Putin as his successor. What's more, Berezovsky created the Medved political movement, which later turned into United Russia.

In short, without Berezovsky there would have been no Putin.

Yet Berezovsky's role has been deliberately exaggerated. He did not single-handedly create the corrupt political regime of the 1990s. What's more, after his self-imposed exile to London, Berezovsky quickly lost all of his former political influence in Russia.

After losing popularity in the 1990s, Yeltsin was in need of serious support to maintain his hold on power. He gave broad authority to the siloviki, FSB and pro-Yeltsin governors. The third pillar of support consisted of the so-called oligarchs, who provided the authorities with enormous resources to maintain the political status quo and guarantee that power would be handed to loyal forces after Yeltsin's exit.

Berezovsky was one of those oligarchs. He succeeded in creating the country's largest pool of influential media assets, including the ORT (now Channel One) and TV-6 television stations, Kommersant and Nezavisimaya Gazeta newspapers and dozens of others. That media empire became his chief political asset and the source of his political influence. Berezovsky received most of these assets from the authorities, who used him to further the Kremlin's interests. In addition, the Kremlin effectively handed him his single greatest business asset, Sibneft, which he co-owned with Roman Abramovich.

Perhaps Berezovsky's most significant political legacy was his recreation of a Soviet-style agitprop that controlled the country's primary media outlets and used them to promote the interests of the ruling regime. In this area, Berezovsky was perhaps best remembered as the mastermind behind ORT's media campaigns to discredit former Mayor Yury Luzhkov and former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, both of whom were his implacable foes.

Clearly, the propaganda machine for manipulating public opinion had already been created and refined by the time Putin came to power. Putin merely took the mechanism into his own hands. Once he had gained control over ORT and NTV, he quickly consolidated his authority.

Property ownership turned out to be just as conditional. The same assets that had been handed out to oligarchs in the 1990s were later appropriated by loyal oligarchs and state corporations headed by Putin's friends. Every asset owned by Berezovsky and his partners was taken away.

After forcing Berezovsky to flee to London and sentencing him in absentia to six years in prison, Putin's regime has once again found a way to use him. After we learned of his death

on Saturday, the Kremlin's propaganda machine reminded everyone that this is the man who plotted Russia's downfall. Berezovsky has left the stage before he could witness the downfall of the man he helped ascend to the Russian throne.

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