

Khodorkovsky Marks 50th Behind Bars

By [Natalya Krainova](#)

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President Vladimir Putin with Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Yukos oil company founder.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former owner of defunct oil giant Yukos, spent his 50th birthday Wednesday behind bars after spending nearly 10 years in prison on charges of fraud, embezzlement and tax evasion in what many see as President Vladimir Putin's revenge for the businessman's political ambitions.

Over the past 10 years, Khodorkovsky, set to be freed next October provided he is not slapped with new charges, has become an icon for many political opposition forces, even repeatedly appearing on their banners during street protests.

At the time of his arrest, Khodorkovsky was Russia's richest man and one of the country's seven most influential businessmen, a group known as “Semibankirshchina,” and he also financed the liberal political opposition and Communists.

Even while behind bars, he has retained a sense of public authority by writing multiple articles and five books on pressing political, social and economic issues.

According to a [poll](#) released Tuesday by the independent Levada Center, one-third of Russians support parole for Khodorkovsky, twice those who want him to remain in prison.

The poll was carried out among 1,600 people in 45 regions with a margin of error of 3.4 percent.

Head of the For Human Rights Movement Lev Ponomarev called Khodorkovsky “a person in the spotlight of social and political life in Russia,” saying by telephone that he is “indisputably a leader.”

“This is a unique example of when a person who is behind bars continues to have an impact on the political environment in the country,” he said.

Sergei Mitrokhin, leader of the liberal opposition Yabloko party, which Khodorkovsky sponsored in 2003, said Khodorkovsky had been jailed because he “dared to challenge Putin.”

Preceding his arrest in October 2003, Khodorkovsky did openly criticize state-run oil giant Rosneft in February, accusing the company of corruption right in front of Putin's face at a public meeting. Putin retorted at that time that Yukos had non-transparent procedures of paying taxes — a statement that foreshadowed Khodorkovsky's later conviction on tax evasion charges.

Later, in April, Khodorkovsky announced plans to finance liberal opposition political parties of Yabloko and the now defunct Union of Right Forces, or SPS, ahead of the December 2003 parliamentary elections.

In May, a powerful think tank, Council for National Strategy, headed by former Kremlin insider Stanislav Belkovsky published a report accusing Yukos leadership of plotting to overthrow Putin by financing liberal opposition and the Communists.

In October, Khodorkovsky traveled to the Volga federal district, where he met regional authorities to promote his company's interests, and he also lectured to university professors and students, often criticizing the oil-dependent economy.

Some politicians and businessmen at the time saw Khodorkovsky as their candidate for the March 2004 presidential vote, although Khodorkovsky never voiced any intention to run in the elections.

Mitrokhin seemed to think that it was his proactive manner that ultimately did him in.

“He is serving his time so that many oligarchs who wish to do politics don't do it without the president's approval,” Mitrokhin said by telephone.

Ahead of his birthday, Khodorkovsky gave a large [interview](#) to The New Times magazine, which was published in three parts on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. In the interview, he shed light on his life in prison, politics and his family, saying that he “could hardly imagine the possibility of being released” because he'd “gotten used to prison.”

Speaking about politics, Khodorkovsky criticized both authorities and political opposition in Russia, accusing the former of corruption, limiting freedom of expression and economic

freedom, and the latter of “replacing actions with words” and lacking “sincerity and honesty.”

Many high-profile Russian politicians and cultural figures, as well as three European lawmakers, congratulated Khodorkovsky in public statements on Wednesday.

Among the Russian well-wishers were Alexei Navalny, opposition leader and anti-corruption blogger; Mikhail Prokhorov, billionaire and leader of the Civil Platform political party; Ilya Ponomarev, State Duma deputy with A Just Russia; Boris Akunin, popular writer of detective novels; popular Soviet actor Sergei Yursky; and others.

“Dear Mikhail, you have already become a symbol of courage and patience,” Prokhorov [wrote](#) on his Livejournal blog.

“I am sure that you will need more of these qualities — both where you are spending your anniversary and out of prison where you will certainly find yourself,” he wrote, saying he had known Khodorkovsky since 1991.

Ponomarev, who had worked at Khodorkovsky's company, Yukos, wished him the chance to spend his 51st, or at least 52nd birthday out of prison, calling him “one of the most interesting, brightest, most courageous and most honest” people in Russia in a video address posted on Khodorkovsky's official [website](#).

Navalny wished Khodorkovsky “health and freedom,” he [wrote](#) on his Livejournal blog.

The European lawmakers congratulating Khodorkovsky were Andreas Schockenhoff and Gernot Erler, members of the German Federal Parliament; and Karin Woldseth, Member of the Norwegian parliament and delegate to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Their video [addresses](#) were posted on Khodorkovsky's official website.

Khodorkovsky's supporters in Moscow planned to stage solitary pickets and a “festive walk” along Novy Arbat late Wednesday, Pyotr Tsarkov, co-leader of the Moscow branch of the opposition movement Solidarity, said on his [blog](#) on Ekho Moskvy's website.

Khodorkovsky is not legally entitled to any relaxation of his prison regime on his birthday and can only celebrate with a tea party with cellmates, his lawyer Vadim Klyuvgant [told](#) legal news agency Rapsi on Wednesday.

But in one happy coincidence, Khodorkovsky will also get to meet with his wife, two 14-year-old sons and 22-year-old daughter on his birthday, Klyuvgant said.

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