

Khodorkovsky, Tolokonnikova Enrich Russian Literature

By [John Freedman](#)

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About halfway through an evening of readings organized by the Andrei Sakharov Memorial Center on Friday, one of the readers added a few words of her own.

"I have the sense that this is a funeral memorial of some sort," she said.

A woman sitting in the Center's exhibition hall immediately responded: "No! No! No! We are filled with hope!"

"That's what I wanted to say," added the woman at the rostrum, but before she could continue a man in the audience shouted, "Next year we will greet him with champagne!"

The "he," to which the man referred was Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the oil tycoon whom many believe was jailed because of the political threat he posed to then- and current-President Vladimir Putin. The "next year" the speaker had in mind is about 10 months hence when

Khodorkovsky is slated to be released from prison following the second of two terms, to which he was convicted. The readings on Friday commemorated the 10th anniversary of Khodorkovsky's arrest in 2003.

A note on the door of the Sakharov Center exhibit hall described the event this way: "International Readings of Solidarity with Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Platon Lebedev and all Political Prisoners in Russia."

The confusion about the atmosphere reigning at the readings was natural and unavoidable. It was difficult to say what permeated the air more; optimism or pessimism, joy or sorrow. It is a fact that each reading had been greeted with reverential silence until the speaker made her observation about the event resembling a funeral. Afterwards, warm applause accompanied each reader away from the rostrum.

In principle, readers were anyone who came to the Center and wished to participate between the hours of 6 and 9 p.m. They included actors, journalists, political activists, writers and others, all of whom participated anonymously, although most in attendance probably recognized journalists Irina Yasina, Yury Saprykin and Kulle Pispanen, the activist Maria Baronova, the economist Vladimir Pereverzin, and actors Yulia Aug and Oksana Mysina. Author Lev Rubinstein participated by way of a video recording.

The texts, to which these individuals and others gave voice included writings by Khodorkovsky and jailed Pussy Riot member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, excerpts from letters between Khodorkovsky and novelist Boris Akunin, as well as a greeting from Lebedev, Khodorkovsky's business partner who is also imprisoned.

In the course of the evening it became clear that the legal and political tribulations of some Russians over the last decade have created major additions to the dubious, but storied genre of Russian prison literature. Loosely speaking, its founders were Alexander Radishchev and Pyotr Chaadayev in the late 18th-early 19th centuries. Mikhail Bakunin, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Varlam Shalamov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Yevgenia Ginzburg are just a few of the writers in the 19th and 20th centuries who expanded the canon significantly.

If you're planning on teaching a course on the topic, you will want to add Khodorkovsky and Tolokonnikova to the syllabus.

Khodorkovsky's compelling correspondence with novelist Lyudmila Ulitskaya was already used as the basis for a theatrical production mounted jointly by the Sakharov Center and the Joseph Beuys Theater a few years ago. His essays are regularly printed in the New York Times, the Financial Times and other major media outlets. He is the author of several books.

It is probably not surprising that on an evening devoted primarily to Khodorkovsky, Tolokonnikova also emerged as a major figure. In prison for just over a year, following conviction for participating in a brief punk-rock, guerrilla performance at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, she has penned numerous essays of political and literary clout. On Friday actresses Aug and Mysina, respectively, read the full texts of Tolokonnikova's declaration of a hunger strike on Sept. 23, 2013, and her "A Matter of Principle," a defense of radical activism that was originally published in The New Times on Aug. 26, 2013.

Both essays are written with the clarity of thought and word that guarantee their future lives as literary texts of importance.

After reading a note of support that Khodorkovsky wrote to Pussy Riot members Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, one speaker on Friday expressed the opinion that Khodorkovsky served as a model for their active resistance in prison. "I would not be surprised to learn later that Nadya and others will admit that," the speaker said.

The Friday night readings were streamed live on the internet. A [complete archive](#) of the stream is posted on the site of the Press Center of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev. Those interested in reading more of [Khodorkovsky's writings](#) can find a selection of his essays and addresses in English on his own website. Information about the Sakharov Center may be found on the [organization's website](#).

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