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Putin's Amnesties Show His Concern for Economy

By Victor Davidoff

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Former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky's release from prison after receiving a presidential pardon is without question the biggest event of 2013. And, as befitting a major event, in just a few days it has generated host of myths about the circumstances of the pardon and diametrically opposed reasons for it.

The first myth was created by President Vladimir Putin himself when he said at his press conference on Dec. 19 that Khodorkovsky "had petitioned me for clemency," which Putin agreed to sign. Technically this is what happened, but the president didn't mention an important detail uncovered by Kommersant: On Nov. 12, Khodorkovsky was visited in prison by senior secret service officials, who suggested that he write the petition. Thus, the initiative to release Khodorkovsky — who was slated to be released next August — did not come from the prisoner, but from the Kremlin.

Putin

understands that improving Russia's human rights record and easing confrontation with the West is a prerequisite for foreign investment.

There are several versions about what moved Putin to suddenly show mercy, but no one is seriously considering goodwill as a possible motive. After all, he might have done this a long time ago. But instead of showing mercy, Putin publicly alleged the unproven assertion that Khodorkovsky was "up to his elbows in blood." As the popular blogger Kirill Shulika aptly noted on LiveJournal: "Putin is not capable of mercy. It's not in his character or in his KGB training. All of his decisions about amnesty and clemency are absolutely pragmatic."

Journalist Natalya Gevorkyan wrote in a column on Svoboda.org that "the clemency story is largely for export. After a series of horrible laws passed by the State Duma, with the events in Ukraine in the background and the Olympics just ahead — which a number of world leaders will not attend — Russia is looking more and more like 'the evil empire.'"

The policies of Putin's third term certainly have moved Russia firmly into the group of rogue states. Western powers and even the majority of the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which are largely dependent on the Russian economy, have found themselves in conflict with the Kremlin as they try to protect themselves from political and economic pressure. Even the president of poor little Moldova, which signed the Association Agreement with the EU last month, joined the group of Western leaders and announced that he would not attend the Winter Olympics in Sochi.

For the Kremlin, political isolation on the world arena has been the status quo for almost a century, and it hasn't prevented the country from pursuing policies that irritate both the West and its own citizens. Only when economic inefficiency pushed the country toward crisis did the Kremlin leaders begin a program of liberalization, which by tradition in Russia begins with amnesty for political prisoners who, by definition, should not have been imprisoned in the first place. That's what Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev did in the 1950s and what Mikhail Gorbachev started with perestroika in the 1980s.

So Khodorkovsky's clemency should be considered along with other recent Kremlin initiatives to redress gross human rights violations, such as the amnesty for the crew of the Arctic Sunrise, Pussy Riot members and several defendants in the "Bolotnoye" case. It's also worth noting that in Putin's news conference Thursday, he did not use any of the anti-Western rhetoric that has been his trademark over the past years. He even used the phrase "our American friends," which sounded quite strange coming from his lips, and announced that no decision had been made about deploying short-range missiles in the Kaliningrad region. He even recognized Israel's right to security.

Sergei Aleksashenko, former deputy director of the Central Bank, chalks up Putin's unexpected steps to the urgent need to attract investment into the Russian economy. "Over the last couple of years, Putin has talked about the investment climate and has conducted many meetings about it," Aleksashenko wrote on his blog on Ekho Moskvy. "The participants at those meetings said that Khodorkovsky was a symbol of the relationship between business and the authorities. And that as long as Khodorkovsky was in jail, there would not be any improvement in the investment climate."

In a recent interview to Reuters, Sberbank head German Gref confirmed the threat of stagnation and was highly skeptical about the prospects for economic growth. "Russia's economy is in urgent need of reform to unlock new sources of growth as the consumer spending boom that has driven its expansion runs out of steam," he said. Like Soviet leaders in the past, the present Kremlin leaders understand that improving the human rights situation and easing confrontation with the West is an essential prerequisite for the kind of investment that could put the economy on the path of growth. Who said it is useless for the West to apply pressure on Russia to improve its human rights record?

For now, the release of Khodorkovsky is a purely symbolic act. Only time will tell if the Kremlin is ready for serious economic reform. It's good to remember, however, that freeing human rights activist Andrei Sakharov and other political prisoners in 1986 did not save the Soviet economy or keep the Soviet Union from dissolving five years later.

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