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German Role Seen as Pivotal in Khodorkovsky Release

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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German politician Marieluise Beck, left, smiling next to Khodorkovsky during their meeting Saturday in Berlin. **Stefan Kaminski**

After former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky walked free on Friday after more than 10 years in prison, he spent less than 24 hours in his home country.

Instead of going to see his parents in the suburbs of Moscow, he flew straight to Germany, part of an apparent deal he had made with the Kremlin to secure his release, a deal that observers say was achieved partly thanks to German diplomacy and the special relationship President Vladimir Putin has with Europe's largest country.

The leading German role in the drama was played by former German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who acted as the main mediator between Putin and Khodorkosky's lawyers, working for some 2 1/2 years to help facilitate Khodorkovsky's release.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is seen as Putin's closest ally in the European Union despite sometimes rocky personal relations, assisted as well, raising the issue of Khodorkovsky's imprisonment on numerous occasions during talks with Putin. Merkel said she was "happy" when she found out the news about his being pardoned.

"Russian-German relations are closer and more stable than Russia's relations with other Western countries — the two countries trust each other," said Jens Siegert, who heads the Moscow office of the Boell Foundation, a Green Party-leaning think tank.

"Germany falls in the category of countries whose opinion the Kremlin is not indifferent to. If, for example, Sweden appealed to Russia with a request to pardon Khodorkovsky, it would likely not have such political force as one from Germany," Siegert said.

At a news conference Sunday in Berlin, Khodorkovsky thanked Merkel and said he found out about her role in his release only when he arrived in Germany. He did not elaborate on what exactly her role was, and on Monday, Putin aide Yury Ushakov told reporters that if Merkel had played some role, she would tell about it herself.

"First of all, Merkel was concerned that the second case against Khodorkovsky was more a question of politics than a legal matter," Siegert said. "Secondly, she wanted to be re-elected, and public opinion in Germany is very critical toward Khodorkovsky's prosecution."

The role of Genscher, who organized Khodorkovsky's flight to Berlin and met him at the Berlin airport, is clearer. Over the last 2 1/2 years, he had been on a "mission" designed to free Khodorkovsky, according to Alexander Rahr, scientific director of the German-Russian Forum think-tank and Genscher's consultant during the mission.

Genscher told Russia Today on Saturday that Khodorkovsky's lawyers had asked him to help secure their client's release, Rahr said, and after that he worked closely with the chancellor's office, Merkel personally, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and the German embassy in Moscow in order to accomplish the mission. German media reports said it was Merkel who asked Genscher to be a mediator between Putin and Khodorkovsky's lawyers.

Genscher purportedly had two meetings with Putin. The first meeting took place in June 2012 in Berlin and was organized by the chancellor's office, while the second meeting took place this year. Rahr said Khodorkovsky's release was achieved thanks to a long negotiation process that he called "German secret diplomacy," adding that there still existed secret channels of communications with Russia in Germany.

Khodorkovsky said he found out about the possibility of seeking a pardon on Nov. 12, when his lawyers, citing word from Genscher, told him he did not need not to admit his guilt to request one.

Sergei Utkin, an expert on European politics at the Russian Academy of Sciences, said it was a deliberate choice to appoint Genscher as mediator because he had good connections with all the necessary people in Russia and was famous for his ability to find a common language with everyone.

"Genscher played a crucial role in facilitating the process of moving refugees from East

Germany to West Germany when the Berlin Wall collapsed. So he has experience with fulfilling the function of mediator in more difficult situations," Utkin said.

In a statement Friday, Merkel said that Genscher acted with her Foreign Ministry's support, saying that the government appreciated the efforts of Genscher, who had "intensively worked on this case on the sidelines."

Siegert said that not only "secret democracy" helped attain Khodorkovsky's release but also the efforts of some German politicians who raised awareness about Khodorkovsky's case, such as Marieluise Beck, a Bundestag member who visited several court hearings and tried to visit Khodorkovsky in prison but was barred from doing so by the prison administration. Beck met with Khodorkovsky at his Berlin hotel on Saturday to congratulate him on his release.

"There probably would not be a positive result without public opinion that created a certain environment in Germany for such a decision to be made," Siegert said, adding that Khodorkovsky's release would likely have a positive impact on Russian-German relations.

But Utkin said it was unlikely that Khodorkovsky's release would be a precedent for other cases and that if a prominent politician from another country, such as former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, entered into talks with Putin on Khodorkovsky, it would likely lead to the similar result.

"There are people with whom Putin has special relations in other countries too. So it's wrong to think that there would be such cases in German-Russian relations in the future. Probably Khodorkovsky's release will be the only such one," Utkin said.

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