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Putin's Confrontation With West 'Artificial,' Says Khodorkovsky

By The Moscow Times

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Mikhail Khodorkovsky

WASHINGTON — President Vladimir Putin's confrontation with the West is "artificial" and aimed at protecting Russia's ruling elite and distracting attention from a corrupt system, a former Russian oil tycoon said on Wednesday.

"The current confrontation with the West is absolutely artificial," Mikhail Khodorkovsky told the Atlantic Council think tank.

"The cooling of relations has been inspired by those Russian elites who want to hold on to power."

Speaking through a translator, Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, said, "They desperately need an image of an enemy who would distract the attention of the populace from the corruption and inefficiency that exists in the power."

Khodorkovsky's empire, which included now-defunct Russian oil company Yukos, produced more crude than Qatar before he ran afoul of Putin and was jailed for fraud and tax evasion. Putin pardoned him in December 2013.

Khodorkovsky, one of Putin's most outspoken critics, lives in Switzerland.

"Unfortunately, there can be no talk of any new strategic rapprochement while Putin remains in power," Khodorkovsky said.

"In Russia such a system has been built under which any decision can be suddenly changed at the whim of one person, who is not controlled by any internal political mechanisms," he said.

Asked whether he would run for president of Russia, Khodorkovsky replied, "I don't want to waste questions that have no practical value right now."

But, he said, "sooner or later" a power change would occur in Russia and the West should be prepared to help Russia quickly reintegrate into the global system.

That could happen by making Russia a member of NATO and the European Union.

Khodorkovsky said it would be in Putin's interest to "freeze" the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

He cautioned Washington over sending weapons to Ukraine, and said most Russians already believed the conflict there was between Russia and the United States.

"This situation is going to keep on developing in this direction if arms start being shipped to Ukraine," he said.

"Then you have the question whether the United States is ready to step into the conflict and to win because if it is not ready for that this will be interpreted as America having lost."

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