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Russia’s Businessmen Are Natural Opponents of Putin. They Just Don’t Know It Yet

By Vladislav Inozemtsev

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Russian leading businessmen meeting with Vladimir Putin in 2025. **Kremlin.ru**

Russia's business elite and the Russian opposition have a lot more in common than they might think. Despite shunning each other, they will need to use each other's strengths.

There are a lot of similarities between the fate of Russian business and the country’s Liberal Party in the 1990s. While at the time, businessmen in Russia were dependent on the government, they were able to directly influence it. With the ascent of Vladimir Putin to the presidency, this influence has not only disappeared but can no longer be taken seriously.

The detention and arrest of Vadim Moshkovich, one of the richest men in Russia, a well-known philanthropist, is one of the most significant recent events in the country. Experts have long said that Russia is approaching a new era of redistribution. They were right.

Since the Yukos case and the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the entrepreneurial class can no longer take for granted that they will not be interfered with. Separating the business world from politics in exchange for low taxes and security is no longer possible.

A similar thing happened to the Liberals. In the mid-1990s, they freely ceded the levers of state power to the siloviki, actively supported Putin's rise to the presidency and allowed themselves to be marginalized. The mistakes committed by both of these groups made them if not enemies in the eyes of the public, then inevitable evils, which also became an important factor in the support for Putinism.

It is surprising that neither of these groups has ever tried to initiate a constructive dialog, even when it became possible and necessary, such as in the "dual power" Medvedev times and when the consequences of Putin's return became unignorable.

But even then, business kept its distance. Alexey Navalny even took part in the Moscow mayoral election with the signatures of United Russia deputies. The results were not long in coming: the "pro-Medvedev" Mikhail Abyzov and the Magomedov brothers were sent to Stalin-esque penal colonies, Boris Nemtsov was killed and Navalny had to be fiddled with. Nothing changed.

The opposition continued to frustrate the oligarchs, who in turn shunned anyone whose politics stood apart from the Kremlin.

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The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 pitted these two groups against each other like never before. The anti-Putin opposition has mostly moved abroad, where it has been received kindly, if not enthusiastically.

Businessmen, on the other hand, were considered Putin's accomplices. They have been sanctioned and their actions confined to Russia, much to the Kremlin's delight. This is where the mutual ill-will of both groups manifested itself with renewed vigor. Frustrated with the slow pace of Brussels' deliberations, critics of the regime began compiling lists of people, including representatives of big business, to sanction. Meanwhile, the oligarchs who remained in Russia began exercising their loyalty to the authorities.

Meanwhile, this division seems to be the biggest folly of Russia's post-Soviet history. I cannot say that I have spent most of my free time in conversations with both the leaders of the domestic liberal movement and representatives of big business. But I have experience in communicating with both. I found that these groups are incredibly similar in their degree of education, honesty, principle, rationality of their view of the world, orientation in the coordinates of progress and reactionary nature.

Moreover, they are united by the values and norms that Russia's bureaucracy stamps on. But these natural allies have positioned each other as sworn enemies for years.

The hopes for a "beautiful Russia of the future" are fading year on year. They need Vadim Moshkovich no less than Navalny. A new forward-facing country and a society, rejecting

dictatorship and autarky, can only be built through the joint efforts of business and civil society. Both parties are equally interested in a state governed by the rule of law, in democratically elected and accountable authorities. They would both benefit from a peaceful country secure in its place in the international community rather than trying to change the global order at the cost of tens and thousands of lives.

Moreover, it seems to me that today it is only the Russian entrepreneurial class that can lead the opposition to Putin. It cannot turn its back on Russia and settle in the West where it is unwelcome, not least because its life's work and wealth remain in the country and will simply be handed over to robbers and strongmen if they leave. For the entrepreneurial class, democracy and the legal order are more important than ever.

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The oligarchs' caution has not kept them safe, despite Putin's guarantees. The Moshkovich case shows that nothing can now save them from property seizure. For example, a company that has just been re-registered from a foreign jurisdiction to a Russian one will be confiscated by a lawsuit filed by a firm that has remained in Cyprus. If you have a patron in the Kremlin or State Duma, any asset can be yours.

I am convinced that, with the exception of those who directly benefited from his patronage, Russia's most successful businessmen are not try allies of Putin. The difference between self-made businessmen and those who have become friends of the dictator is obvious. I find it hard to believe that self-starters will gladly obey anyone who made their way to the top solely through servility and negative selection. Those forces guarantee Putin's lifetime in power. Today they are being inserted into Russian reality by circumstances, Western authorities and fugitive oppositionists. It is time to realize that it is better to look for allies among businessmen because they are the only remaining social group in the country that shares the values of liberalism and democracy.

No one is more motivated to deconstruct the regime and more qualified to run the new Russia than competitive Russian business. He has long recognized the advantages of democratic rule over dictatorship. Today, the Kremlin is sending them a signal that their time is running out. If even these signals are unable to induce the most successful and independent people in Russian society to come to their senses, nothing and no one can save Russia.

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