

# Why Berlin is active on behalf of the Russian oligarch Khodorkovsky

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The release from jail of the Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky has been celebrated as a great success for German foreign policy.

After his release from a Russian prison just before Christmas, Khodorkovsky flew directly to Berlin, where he was met at the airport by former German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher. As it turned out, in years of secret negotiations, Genscher had sought intensively to secure the release of the oligarch and had twice met with the Russian President Vladimir Putin, acting in close consultation with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Russia expert Alexander Rahr, who assisted Genscher, described Khodorkovsky's release in the newsweekly *Der Spiegel* as a "triumph for German secret diplomacy". It showed that "Germany still enjoys channels [of communication] to Moscow that the British or Americans do not have."

The term "secret diplomacy" is itself suspicious. Ever since the First World War, it was frowned upon because secret agreements between the great powers had contributed significantly to the outbreak of war. It was then completely discredited by the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939, with its secret clauses regarding the partition of Poland.

Rahr is regarded as Germany's most well-known Russia expert, advising both the government and industrial corporations. His mention of "secret diplomacy" raises the question of what secret agreements are linked to the release of Khodorkovsky, and what Berlin's objectives are in making them.

Genscher's involvement shows that important goals are at stake. The 86-year-old Free Democratic Party (FDP) politician is a political heavyweight. He has belonged to every German government between 1969 and 1992, first for five years as interior minister and then for 18 years as foreign minister. He was involved in all the fundamental political decisions of the time, especially the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and German reunification in 1989-90.

Genscher's account of the release—that it was for purely humanitarian reasons—is not credible. There are tens of thousands of political prisoners worldwide who have far better humanitarian grounds to justify their release than Khodorkovsky.

While it may be true that Russia's richest man landed behind bars because he tangled with Putin and his circle of power, that does not make him a martyr of democracy. Khodorkovsky, now 50 years old, is one of that exclusive club of oligarchs who, after the collapse of the USSR, used their starting position in the Communist Youth League to enrich themselves by means of robbery, fraud and speculation to take over formerly nationalised property. They left behind not only a social wasteland, but also many dead bodies.

Once the judicial authorities were let loose on Khodorkovsky, it was not difficult to find evidence for his conviction. In September 2011, even the European Court of Human Rights approved the actions of the Russian authorities against Khodorkovsky's oil company Yukos. His prison sentence was at most "unjust," because other oligarchs who had perpetrated similar crimes were spared prosecution.

What makes Khodorkovsky of interest to German politicians is his absolute commitment to the looting of social wealth. "Our compass is profit, our idol is Her Majesty, capital," is his oft-quoted credo from the year 1993. For Khodorkovsky, freedom means primarily the unrestricted freedom of the market, including the opening up of Russia to Western capital.

This brought him into conflict with Putin, who also protects the wealth of the Russian oligarchs, but regards a strong Russian nation-state, which can also act internationally as a great power, as vital to a functioning Russian capitalism.

Probably the most important reason for Khodorkovsky's arrest in autumn 2003 were his efforts to sell up to 50 percent of the Yukos oil company to the US corporations Exxon and Chevron. For the Kremlin, this was not acceptable. After Khodorkovsky's conviction, Yukos was broken up and incorporated into the state-dominated oil company Rosneft, which is one of the world's largest energy companies.

The strategic role of oil and gas has changed over the last ten years. New extraction methods, such as deep sea drilling and fracking, have unlocked new deposits globally, undermining Russia's position as an energy exporter. Putin was therefore looking for new ways of strengthening the position of Russia. The main project of his third term as president is to build a Eurasian Union. This is to be modelled on the European Union, and would include large parts of the former Soviet Union and

other countries.

Before the presidential elections, Putin presented the project in a detailed article in *Izvestia* on October 3, 2011. He stressed that the Eurasian Union did not “entail any kind of revival of the Soviet Union ... It would be naïve to try to revive or emulate something that has been consigned to history.”

Putin wrote that the Eurasian Union promised to strengthen Russia’s global position: “We suggest a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world and serving as an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region.”

At the same time, he denied that the project was directed against the European Union. Rather, the Eurasian Union would “join the dialogue with the EU.” The goal is “a harmonised community of economies stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok.” The partnership between the Eurasian and the European Unions would “prompt changes in the geo-political and geo-economic setup of the continent as a whole, with a guaranteed global effect.”

Putin’s article triggered disquiet in the US and Europe. There was hardly a major newspaper or a think tank which did not comment on it in detail. In particular, the German and US governments concluded that their strategy—bringing large parts of the former Soviet Union under their economic and political control, increasingly isolating Russia, and strengthening their influence in strategically important Central Asia—was at risk.

Even Beijing reacted nervously. It saw Putin’s foray as a rival project to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which is meant to strengthen China’s position in Central Asia.

The right-wing American think tank Heritage Foundation warned: “Russia’s Eurasian Union could endanger the neighbourhood and U.S. interests.” It advised the US and its allies in Europe and Asia, “to balance the Russian geopolitical offensive and protect U.S. and Western interests”.

At a press conference in Dublin in December 2012, then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton clearly indicated that the United States will not tolerate Putin’s project. There is a “move to re-Sovietise the region,” Clinton said, regarding talk of a Eurasian Union. “But let’s make no mistake about it. We know what the goal is and we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it.”

The EU and Germany are trying to pull former Soviet republics onto their side under the “Eastern Partnership.” This project is aimed at bringing Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia and Armenia closer to the European Union. The EU explicitly excludes simultaneous membership of the Eurasian Union and the Eastern Partnership.

The conflict escalated last November when, at the last minute, the Ukrainian government refused to sign an Association Agreement with the EU. The agreement with the EU would have meant massive cuts in pensions and social spending, as well as gas price increases for private citizens, which the government feared it would not survive politically.

On the other hand, Russia was offering the almost bankrupt country loans and gas price discounts of some \$20 billion.

The EU and the US responded by massively supporting pro-European protests against President Viktor Yanukovich and his government. The UDAR party of professional boxer Vitali Klitschko, a spokesman of the opposition, is sponsored and trained by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation of Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU). They do not object when Klitschko regularly stands side by side with the fascist Oleh Tyagnibok from the All-Ukrainian Association “Svoboda.”

So far, the opposition has not succeeded in forcing the government and the president, who have substantial backing in eastern Ukraine, to resign. But they are continuing demonstrations with Western support—signalling to the Kremlin that they are willing to divide the country, should it join Putin’s union. Without the 45 million inhabitants of Ukraine, the largest ex-Soviet republic after Russia, the Eurasian Union would be a rump organisation.

It is in this context that Khodorkovsky’s release must be seen. Since German reunification 23 years ago, the German government has systematically worked to gain a foothold in Eastern Europe and the ex-USSR. In this, Berlin is following the traditional thrust of German imperialism, which in the First and especially the Second World War had conquered Ukraine and parts of Russia.

Berlin has never excluded the possibility of cooperation with Putin, as long as this is on its terms. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party, SPD) enjoyed a personal friendship with the Russian President, and attested him to be a “flawless democrat.” Now Berlin sees a new opportunity to get back in business with Putin on its own terms. While in Ukraine it supports and organises the anti-Russian protests, Berlin hopes simultaneously for a greater opening up of Russia for German capital.

This is how Alexander Rahr, Genscher’s assistant in the negotiations, interprets Khodorkovsky’s release. “If there are politicians who can influence Putin, it is the Chancellor and the former designers of German *Ostpolitik*,” he wrote on 2 January in *Die Welt*. “The fact that Khodorkovsky was flown to Germany after his pardon shows that Putin is seeking a rapprochement with the West via Berlin.”



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