Mikhail Khodorkovsky announces his return to Russian politics

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Former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was released early from prison last year, announced during several interviews in September that he was making a comeback to Russian politics.

Khodorkovsky's comeback has been prepared jointly by the German and US governments. He speaks for a section of the Russian oligarchy that fears a social explosion in Russia and is therefore striving for closer collaboration with the imperialist countries, where large quantities of the oligarchy's wealth is hoarded.

Khodorkovsky belongs to those criminal oligarchs who enriched themselves fabulously during the restoration of capitalism. Prior to his imprisonment in 2003, he was one of the most influential men in Russia, maintaining close economic and political relations with the US. The destruction of Khodorkovsky's Yucos oil concern presaged a major redistribution of wealth and control over raw materials within the Russian ruling elite.

At the end of last year, President Vladimir Putin pardoned him and he was granted early release from prison. His release was negotiated above all with the German government. The Russian president was seeking to draw closer to the Western powers through Khodorkovsky, while attempting to also win over pro-Western factions within the Russian ruling elite.

At the time, Khodorkovsky, who now lives in Switzerland, declared that he would withdraw from politics and focus on his private life. In reality, more than six months of concentrated work was devoted to preparing his political comeback.

During the first half of the year, Khodorkovsky appeared repeatedly in Ukraine. He visited the Maidan protests in March and May in an effort to grant the Ukrainian elections legitimacy, and he financed the sending of election observers. The vote resulted in the victory of the pro-Western oligarch Petro Poroshenko.

In September, he presented his new book on fellow detainees in Russian prisons. Then at the end of the month, Khodorkovsky gave a series of interviews in which he announced his return to Russian politics.

In France's *Le Monde* he warned, "The longer Putin stays in power, the deeper the crisis." He was ready to act as "a crisis president," in order to impose institutional reforms in Russia. Khodorkovsky announced that he would reopen his Open Russia foundation. A few days later, he unveiled the foundation in Berlin.

Like many other oligarchs, Khodorkovsky is concerned that amid growing social tensions and a deepening economic crisis, which is being intensified by Western sanctions, the working class will come to the fore and the Kremlin will lose control.

According to a report in the Russian online newspaper gazeta.ru, crisis scenarios are currently under discussion in the Kremlin envisioning a drop in GDP by 10 percent and a further devaluation of the rouble against the dollar. While the dollar was valued at 32 roubles a year ago, it is now 40 roubles and, according to gazeta.ru, it could rise to 48 roubles next year.

Khodorkovsky's answer to the mounting social and political crisis in Russia is closer cooperation with Western imperialism.

In an interview with the Russian financial newspaper *Vedomosti*, he stated that he was working "for that section of society that shares my values," which is "European orientated," and, like him, cannot do business under Putin. He criticised the increasing turn by the Kremlin to Asia, and the Sino-Russian Sila Sibiri pipeline project.

He explained, "My main task is to make sure that the European-orientated section of (Russian) society plays a decisive role in determining the course of our state." Khodorkovsky insisted that he had enough money to achieve his political goals. His foundation would become the main organisation and most important network of the liberal opposition in Russia.

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The Open Russia foundation was founded in 2001 by Khodorkovsky's Yucos Oil Company. The pro-American orientation of the foundation was made explicit by the composition of its directorate, including among others former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger.

Within a few years, the foundation established a comprehensive network of think tanks, schools and other institutions, which the Kremlin justifiably viewed as a challenge to the government. At the same time, it funded several political parties and State Duma deputies. The reopening of the foundation is a direct challenge to the current government.

Khodorkovsky's latest political moves were discussed closely with Western politicians in the Czech Republic. In September, he held discussions with Karl Schwarzenberg, former foreign minister and current leader of the Czech opposition. Schwarzenberg is the head of a longstanding noble family. The headquarters of Open Russia will be in Prague.

Khodorkovsky will take part in the Forum 2000 conference in Prague this month, where developments in Russia and Eastern Europe since 1989 will be considered. Forum 2000 was founded in 1996 by Vaclav Havel, among others. The guests and supporters of the forum include former US president Bill Clinton, former Israeli president Shimon Peres, as well as former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright.

Khodorkovsky's comeback has been carefully planned and calculated. It comes at a time when the Russian ruling elite, facing Western aggression in Ukraine and a deepening economic crisis, is more divided than ever.

A September 29 comment in the *Financial Times* hailed Khodorkovsky as Putin's "nemesis." The paper wrote, "The Russian business sector, which originally promoted Mr. Putin to end the chaos which had developed under Boris Yeltsin, is unhappy. The whole situation is unsustainable. Mr. Khodorkovsky's reappearance is well timed and clearly not accidental. Companies with big investments in Russia will be nervous but perhaps they should also be hopeful."

The Kremlin has refused to make any official comment on Khodorkovsky's political comeback. But Putin will hardly be surprised by Khodorkovsky's political offensive.

In the *Vedemosti* interview, Khodorkovsky explained the background to his release at the end of last year. "When they came to send me to Germany," he said, "I told these people 'you understand that I won't just stay sitting quietly'. They said that they understood. That means that on this point, there is full and mutual understanding between Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and me."

However, the Kremlin has stepped up its persecution of the liberal opposition in recent months.

Members of the governing United Russia party generally commented on Khodorkovsky's comeback by noting that the oligarch had virtually no prospect of political success. The two leading financial newspapers, *Vedemosti* and *Forbes*, welcomed Khodorkovsky's political engagement. Both newspapers see him, along with Alexei Navalny, who was systematically built up by the US last year, and Alexei Kudrin, as potential future Russian presidents.

Kudrin, who enforced severe social cuts and economic reforms under Putin for years and remains closely aligned with the president, demanded in a recent Reuters interview deeper social cuts and a liberalisation of the economy. According to Kudrin, the Russian elites are very nervous.

The Russian edition of *Forbes* magazine, which mainly speaks for the interests of Russian private investors, welcomed the reopening of the Open Russia foundation. A comment from September 20 stated, "What can one say in objection to this? Nothing. Is it necessary to establish such infrastructure? Of course."

Although Khodorkovsky has stated in interviews he is prepared to cooperate with all possible political partners, the pro-US opposition appears divided. Sergei Mitrochin, head of the US-financed Yabloko party, described Khodorkovsky's political plans as "destructive." "I consider Open Russia to be a counterproductive project, which will only further divide the opposition movement," he said.

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