

Russia Under Putin and Beyond: The Annual Russia Lecture

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Sir Andrew Wood

Thank you. That was very clear and if I might say, very inspiring. I'm going to look for questions. I would ask you please to be brief, say who you are, and when you get the microphone, please speak straight into it so that the interpreters can help.

Question 1

Mikhail, thank you very much for your speech. I'll ask it in English, actually. Ben Judah in his book about fragile empire, in his book about the Putin regime, has a section about you. He says Khodorkovsky was one of the oligarchs who did more to discredit liberal and Western-looking politics of the country than all of the propaganda that came afterwards. My question is, what blame do you place on yourself for the rise of Putinism? Are you willing to apologize to the Russian people for your role in the loans for shares scandals and the prioritization of Yuganskneftegaz? How is your conscience?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

Well, of course it feels great to be great, but the decision to appoint Putin was taken by Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, of course. Unlike what Abramovich Berezovsky, the influence of the inner circle on Boris Nikolayevich was, in my opinion, quite minimal. He made his choice based on wanting to secure the security for his own family. It has to be said that this part anyway, Putin carried out this part perfectly. As concerns Yuganskneftegaz, the decision on privatizing Yuganskneftegaz was taken, I recall, by the then head of that agency, Anatoly Chubais, and this if I'm not mistaken was maybe in 1992, maybe 1993. At that point, I wasn't even thinking about the oil industry.

Question 2

[Indiscernible], KCL. Thank you for your speech. The crisis in Ukraine. It is not only just about Ukraine anymore. It's a much more dangerous crisis. It is between Russia and the Western countries and it is between... It is about values and order in Europe. In this context, what are the chances that younger Russian generation are truly embracing liberal values, in the Putin style or post-Putin style? Thank you.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

I am personally convinced that even now, the young generation is reassessing what's going on in Ukraine. This is not going to be rapid. But in the medium term, say two to three years, I think we're going to encounter totally different assessments of what's going to be happening, that are being told to Russian society, than what we're encountering today. But of course, for this, everybody including us is going to have to do a lot of work.

Question 3

I'm with the Russia and Eurasia Programme here at Chatham House. I was intrigued by what you said about the place of oil and gas in Russia's GDP and the fact that you believe that it's deliberately exaggerated by the Russian leadership. Were you in any way implying that economic diversification has taken place under President Putin's rule?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

I would say that in the Soviet years, the proportion of oil and gas in the country's GDP was even lower. So if anything, it's increased in these years, about doubled approximately. But nevertheless, it remains not the overwhelming part of the GDP. I myself was somewhat surprised when I decided to look at the numbers and any person present here can do the same, visiting the website of the state statistical committee of Russia. These numbers that I've mentioned, they're written, they're in black and white. But the government is doing what it's doing verbally. That is, they don't base themselves on numbers. They just tell people that without oil, you're finished.

Question 4

First of all, great that you're out and free. My question is this: you're proposing a political plan for Russia and this is your political statement, if you will. Are you planning in your group in what way you're going to come to power? Will this be an especially organized coup? Or will you just wait for the window of opportunity to open? Because like you said, it might take a long time to wait for it. So the question is, how are you planning to replace power, through a coup or what? And what are you going to do with today's leaders? Are you going to lustrate them? Are you going to lock them up? Or what?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

That's a 15 year question. I have said many a time that for me, it is not attractive to get some kind of state office for myself, although some may say that my desires are actually more ambitious. I want to change Russia. What we're doing, me and my colleagues, is aimed at that. Whether this takes place tomorrow or in the next 10 years, that's less important although of course we're hoping all to survive until then.

Question 5

My question might be a little related. I was wondering about your view of the current Russian opposition – their strengths and weaknesses and standing in the society. If by some miracle, we had free elections this coming summer, how many votes would Alexei Navalny get, in your opinion? Or anyone else for that matter. Thank you.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

Probably the best indicators will be Navalny's numbers in the elections for Moscow mayor. Depending on your statistics it seems like 28 to 30 per cent, something like that. And the number of votes that Mikhail Prokhorov got during the voting for the presidential elections. They showed 8.5 per cent, but based on the information that is rather widely recognized by the expert community in Russia, realistically he got somewhere around 15 or 18 per cent. So there's the estimate or the potential of the democratic opposition that most precisely corresponds to today's state of society. But the situation is going to change.

Question 6

In your views, supposing the Americans decide to start arming the Ukrainians, do you think Putin is willing to risk a nuclear conflict with the West?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

I'm afraid that at the verbal level, the nuclear card will at some moment, or may at some moment either directly or indirectly be laid on the table. But still, knowing those people who are in the inner circle of power in our country, I don't think that they've gone that insane.

Question 7

[Indiscernible] from Great Britain. Knowing your knowledge of the first generation of the Russian elite and the character of the sanctions that are now being placed on individuals in Russia today, tell us please, how much can we count on the modern Russian elite being able to influence a change of regime in the country?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

I think that the influence, the impact of the sanctions and specifically the personal sanctions indeed, is sufficiently unpleasant for today's Russian elite. In the given situation, what we need to be talking about is more likely not so much about the sanctions that were announced, but about the factual sanctions, the actual ones. But nevertheless, the impact of this part of the Russian elite on regime change, or on some kind of changes in the country, today is not all that significant because the domestic policy of Russia today is based on force or on the threat of use of force.

I don't think that such a policy is very successful for the prospects of the country's development, but of course, the civilian part of the elite towards which the sanctions have hit the most anyway, it demoralizes them.

Question 8

[Indiscernible] transparency, so how much money do you have? Can you give us a figure?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

When I talk about transparency, I speak at the same time about respect for people's personal lives.

Question 9

Jonathan Steele, international affairs commentator. Many Russians including those who are very democratic feel that it was a mistake for NATO to have expanded into the former Soviet space. Do you share that view? Do you think that Ukraine should become a member of NATO? Not will, but should become a member of NATO. What would that mean for Russia if it did? Thank you.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

I personally think that talk in the paradigm of confrontation between blocs is in principle erroneous. This is the path that has led us into where we are today and which is inherent to today's leadership in my country. Unfortunately, action leads to reaction and today we are all in thrall of this conception, and it is an erroneous conception. I personally believe that there should be no boundaries for the movement of ideas, people and capital. Those who set up such borders in the end lose.

Well, about the fate of Ukraine, that's something for the Ukrainian people to decide. I don't want to comment there if I may.

Question 10

Here's my question, a direct question. Are you not afraid of speaking anti-Putin? Here in London, we've had Litvinenko get killed and then this dubious death of Berezovsky. Then someone else. Do you think about this? What have you got to say on the subject?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

You say this to a person who spent 10 years in cells and barracks with not the sort of people that do a lot of respecting of rights in Russian society. Right now, I feel myself absolutely safe, compared to the past 10 years, which does not mean that this is so, but that's how I feel anyway.

Question 11

Delighted to see you, Mikhail Borisovich. What advice do you have for Chancellor Merkel, who has spent so much time with Putin and has been so ineffective in achieving anything concrete and useful?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

I consider that Chancellor Merkel understands Putin better than many people in the West do and the fact that she keeps coming back to the negotiating table, trying to stop bloodshed, although she understands no worse than I do – I emphasize no worse than I do – all of the unlikelihood of achieving this objective. It tells us only that this is a person of iron political will. She is doing what she can do in the current situation. Other solutions are also possible, but for those solutions, you need political will in a broader sense of the term.

Question 12

My question is about patriotism. It seemed to me from your discourse that you have it vis-à-vis Russia and that you certainly intend to follow a path that will be the correct one in the sense of Russia's future in the 21st century. At the same time, we see that patriotism of people of Russia who have been zombified by the mass media in Russia today works in exactly the opposite direction. If we speak of values of a leader, of a potential of a Russian

leader, how does it seem to you? Is this a globality or is this patriotism that needs to lead them towards building the future of the country?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

My view is that patriotism has to be aimed at improving the quality of life of society. In today's 21st century, this after all is openness and participation in global processes. It's competition. I consider that those people who aspire to self-isolation, they don't believe in their own people, and they don't believe in our ability to be competitive in an open marketplace. Can that be called patriotism? I think not.

Question 13

I think there's very widespread feeling in this country that it would be wonderful if we could establish a more positive and closer relationship with Russia, and Russia could emerge as you hope into a democratic member of the European family of nations again. I think the sentiments expressed this evening show that that feeling is very widespread here in this hall as well. There's one word that you didn't mention, which was rather strikingly absent in your analysis. That's nationalism. Hasn't Putin succeeded in mobilizing that great weapon and placing himself in the tradition of the great Russian rulers who first of all expanded the tsarist empire – Ivan the Great, Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, you mentioned Catherine the Great, and so forth – and then Stalin and Molotov, who got back those frontiers when they were lost last time at Brest-Litovsk.

As a result, I think we have a great problem in the West that we can't remain indifferent to aggression on our frontiers, the frontiers of NATO and the EU. We certainly can't be ambiguous in any way about our commitment to collective defence. When we do stand up for those things, we enable Putin to show that the West is attacking him, it's against him, that he's in battle. He requires therefore the disciplines of a war or a Cold War situation. Does that not make it easier for him to impose his tyrannical rule on Russia?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

This problem does exist and there's no simple way out. What would be important in my view would be if indeed the European society wanted the reintegration into a common European family with Russia. It would be important today to see the existence of two Russias. There's Putin's Russia and there's the other Russia, the open Russia. These people, they're not all that few of them, these people who share these European values.

They are unknown here in the West today and tomorrow, when certainly the regime will change, you'll have to build relations and you're going to have to build relations quickly because history as we know – I've gone through two revolutions in Russia myself – history is not going to give us much time. We're talking weeks, months. If we do really and truly want the reintegration of Russia, then it's imperative even today to be building these relations with representatives of this new Russia.

Get to know them. Find common language with them, so that tomorrow, when the changes occur, you won't need lots of time to build these relations of trust. From our end, we're going to try to work on this, but of course, we need support and understanding here.

Sir Andrew Wood

... sitting here to follow up that question. I was very struck by your comment in your speech on this subject. I've yet to see any forward-looking document about what we should be doing that does not say we have to find a way to talk to the Russian people. We have to try and make clear our wider interests and it's not just Putin, it's after Putin, and so on. How are we going to do it?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

Today, Russia's borders are not closed but contacts with Russian society are limited from both ends. We can see that very many people out here in the West are following the simple path. You paint all of Russian society in one colour. You have to reject this simple path. You must continue and maybe even activate contacts with that part of Russian society that represents the embryo of the new Russia.

This is not such a small number of people. They are there, and mechanisms for working with them are perfectly understandable. We meet; we talk; we find mutual understanding. This work needs to be continued. It should not be stopped.

Question 14

John Lloyd from the FT. Mikhail Borisovich, it follows on a bit from Sir Andrew's question about how to speak to the Russians. It's quite difficult when the propaganda, especially in television, is as powerful as it now seems to be and when working for the president, such talented and one could say ruthless propagandists as Kiselyov, Surkov, [indiscernible] and others, and it does seem at least until now that that propaganda of which you have been a victim is quite successful. Do you think it is successful? Do you think that many people don't believe it but may say they do? Do you think it's now failing?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

I will agree with you that the Kremlin's propagandists are working in a talented and efficient way, but they've got one fundamental problem. That's the fact that what they have to say to people is getting further and further distant from real life. We understand that this divergence will gradually force people to start thinking. Very many people simply stop watching TV in Russia, I'm seeing.

As I have already said during my speech, even in the times of the most acute part of the militarist hysteria in Russia, from 11 to 16 approximately per cent of the population of the country not only took an anti-military position, but even deemed it possible to declare it publically. That's not a small number. In big cities, the numbers of these people are even larger. Therefore, of course to be able to get all 140 million people in Russia immediately is not possible.

But if you work with those people who are ready to hear an alternative opinion, who are ready for looking at reality with a critical eye, this is already a great big deal.

Question 15

My question is about Putin's new world order. Where is the border of influence Putin imagines in his mind? Where is the border?

Question 16

Natalya [indiscernible], and in-house Russian lawyer and a member of Chatham House. I'll ask my question in Russian, please. The turn to the left in Russia is imperative. I'm quoting... Vladimir Putin, in order for a peaceful left turn to happen, Putin needs to do only one simple thing – to leave. Only this will guarantee a stable development of the country without break up. What do you consider, has the point of no return passed for Mr Putin? Is a left turn inevitable? Is it just as inevitable in Russia's fate today, as it was when you wrote this article?

Question 17

When you laid out your programme, I understand in very general terms towards the end as to what needed to happen. I found myself saying, I think we've perhaps even in Chatham House heard that from [indiscernible] in the early 1990s, and from Yavlinsky in the late 1990s. My question to you is, what is in your favour of making it work this time around? What has really changed that makes it feasible now but it wasn't then?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

Okay, the boundaries of the world order. In Putin's eyes, it's hard for me to speak for him, but from what we can see, he sees the former USSR countries and to some extent the former Warsaw Pact countries as countries that belong to his zone of influence. To what extent this position has no exceptions or how many more things might be in his ambitions, that's difficult for me to say.

As concerns the turn to the left, I think that those people who have a good idea of the situation in Russia today understand that at honest elections, the victors will be forces that have sufficient left-ish views. Not extreme left necessarily, but definitely left leaning. I personally don't share these views, but if within the framework of an honest election such a government came to power, I would have respect for the choice that my people have made. The whole question is that this needs to happen at honest elections and then at other honest elections, perhaps society might take another choice.

If we speak about previous people from the decisions that were made in the 1990s, it's probably easy to be a commentator about the past, so I'd rather speak about myself now than about my colleagues then. Back then, it seemed to me that the main thing that needed to be done were economic reforms. That is, if we manage to get private property, running a market economy, then everything else will follow on its own.

Of course, that was a mistake, probably forgivable given that I was still quite a young person at that time. People are more complicated than that and you need to start with people's notions about the world around them, about fairness, justice, about the right way of organizing society. This is what needs to be key. That is, first honest elections, and then

if possible, economic reforms. If society feels that economic reforms need to be postponed for a while, what are you going to do then?

That time, the economic reforms were forced upon society and quite strongly forced upon them. In some ways, this was necessary, but we have been paying ever since then for the fact that we didn't listen to the people then.

Question 18

Thank you. [Indiscernible] from Bloomberg News. You spoke about the potential of the opposition. How do you feel about the protest march in March? Do you think it will have the same number of people that took place in 2011-2012? And about your political and economic programme, in what role will you participate? Are you ready to be a candidate for president in the next elections, or even earlier?

Question 19

... Kiev ceded Donbass in return for the Putin regime allowing Kiev to accede to the EU and eventually possibly even join NATO. Would that be the end of it? Or does the Putin regime need now to have a continuous external conflict in order to maintain its own survival?

Mikhail Khodorkovsky

Let's start with this last question. Putin doesn't need Donbass. Putin wants to determine the fate of the world, in negotiations, sitting at the table with the President of the United States, to explain to him that today it's no longer possible to determine the fate of the world like this. So far, nobody's been able to convince him of that.

Donbass, Ukraine, are merely a tool in attaining this goal of his. So therefore I think that partial concessions are not going to suit him at all. As concerns the 1 March demonstration, you need to understand that today coming out to such an event is a very serious problem for people. Some people will find themselves behind bars. Others will lose a job or a government contract, or some other substantial life difficulty. That's the best case scenarios.

So every person who does come out to this demonstration is going to demonstrate high civic courage and that's imperative if we want to rebuild our country. I believe that it's very important to show to the Ukrainian people, to show to our own fellow citizens that not everybody thinks the same way that Putin thinks. Not all people are ready for those thousands of losses, victims, that people who live in Donbass have suffered, in a struggle for, goodness knows what, what for? What is that for anyway?

So from my point of view, this is a solidarity protest, if you will. But I know that my colleagues have other slogans as well that have to do with social problems. But to me, the anti-war slogan is the most important one. All the rest, I've already answered your colleague from Echo Moskv.

Sir Andrew Wood

Ladies and gentlemen, I think we all owe a deep debt of thanks to Mikhail Borisovich, not only because he's given us an intellectual treat, but for the brevity and clarity of his answer. Please, will you join me in thanking him.