

## Mikhail Khodorkovsky's shadow

By Zygmunt Dzieciolowski,  
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It takes nearly thirty hours to travel from Moscow to the town of Krasnokamensk, 6,000 kilometres away. First there is a six-hour flight to Chita, then a six-hour wait for the milk train that trundles through Russia's far east towards the Chinese border. Once on board, there is a further sixteen-hour ride for the businessmen, travellers and smugglers who have reason to make the trip. Then, at last: Krasnokamensk.

The prison camp of this remote, forbidding town is home to the most famous prisoner in the whole of Russia, and a destination too far even for some of his most fervent admirers; but despite the physical isolation, [Mikhail Khodorkovsky's](#) [1] shadow still exercises its own chill over those working beneath the onion domes of the Kremlin.

When I talk to journalists, politicians and businessmen in Moscow, the conversation starts with mundane discussions of the weather, the worsening traffic-jams or the rocketing real-estate prices. It then invariably turns to fundamental questions about the state of Russia; and on such questions, Khodorkovsky's fate is impossible to avoid.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky was one of the richest men in the country, a sharp-featured oligarch who made a fortune in the early, lawless days of Russian capitalism. He became the CEO and major shareholder of the giant Yukos oil company, but after dabbling in politics he [fell foul](#) [2] of the government and was sentenced to eight years in prison for fraud and tax evasion.

That his fall from grace should end up in a frozen prison-camp nearly thirty hours from Moscow speaks volumes about the political overtones of Khodorkovsky's case. The Kremlin wanted to isolate him from lawyers, supporters and the media, especially in the run-up to the G8 summit that the government is due to host in St Petersburg in July 2006.

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"He is already a hero in the eyes of everyone who opposes the way President Putin runs the country", says Valery Panyushkin [3], a journalist on the popular daily newspaper *Kommersant*. Panyushkin's book *Khodorkovsky: the Prisoner of Silence* has become a national bestseller, with 60,000 copies sold and an additional print run already on order from the publishers.

To discover more about the Khodorkovsky phenomenon, I left Moscow one frosty morning in the opposite direction: driving west along the congested Riga highway to Koralovo, a village where the jailed tycoon founded a boarding-school for orphans of military families of Russia twelve years ago. There lives the imprisoned oligarch's mother.

Marina Filippovna Khodorkovskaya tells me that she still receives thousands of letters and notes of support. Businessmen and politicians bring her baskets full of delicacies like red salmon and black caviar. The intellectuals and human-rights activists expressing solidarity include Lyudmila Alexeyeva [4], who heads the Russian Helsinki Group. The Kremlin accuses [5] her of receiving funds from a British intelligence agent, disguised as a diplomat. It appears to be another signal of the government's growing intolerance of dissent.

Despite the support, the oligarch's mother is afraid that she will never see her son free again. She is in her 70s, and he still has six years to serve in Krasnokamensk. Marina Filippovna wants more public pressure put on the government for his release.

That is unlikely, at least for now. Russians say that in difficult times they think with their stomachs, not their brains. The economy is doing well, and jobs are more important at present than social injustice. Big businesses have too much to lose through confrontation to risk opening their mouths too wide.

Russia is a country where governments know how to use power to control and marginalise opposition forces. As a result, whispered resistance over the kitchen table has always been a safer course of action than loud speeches and open demonstration. In the era of Leonid Brezhnev [6], such quiet rebellions played an important role in shaping public feelings. Even now, in the age of the internet and satellite television, kitchen-table resistance has a role to play.

Thus, people wary of confrontation with the Kremlin are once again limiting themselves to small gestures of defiance. "The state has warned companies not to place any adverts with us", the editor of an opposition newspaper explains to me. "But its managers still push cash our way under the table, saying they don't want voices like ours to disappear. Businessmen are deeply concerned." The editor tells me that many rich Russians are busy liquidating their property assets and moving their money abroad to keep it safe from the government. The owners and bosses of the multi-billion dollar Alfa [7] financial-industrial group, which has attracted Kremlin disfavour on several occasions, have even prepared emergency evacuation plans.

Marina Malykhina [8], winner of the Ernst & Young prize for entrepreneurs, is at the age of 26 one of the Russian business world's brightest young stars. She is already the CEO and main shareholder in a market-research company, Magram. She has few illusions about how the worlds of business and politics collide in Russia.

"At first glance Putin's Russia seems stable and predictable, but that's just an illusion" she argues over cappuccino and orange juice at Moscow's "Jazz" café. "In fact, under that peaceful surface different clans, lobbying groups and elites conduct ruthless and brutal wars for power, money and influence. If you know Russia and where to look, you will see this."

How does Mikhail Khodorkovsky fit this restive modern Russia of silent dissent and nervous jockeying for position? Leonid Kesselman [9] is a sociologist from St Petersburg, where Vladimir

Putin worked as the city's deputy mayor after leaving the KGB. He boldly compares Khodorkovsky with one of the Soviet Union's great dissidents and the father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb. [Andrei Sakharov](#) [10] was exiled to the city of Gorky in 1980 after protesting against the invasion of Afghanistan. But the world's media and human-rights activists kept his memory alive, and Sakharov became a symbol of resistance that the Kremlin under a succession of leaders was not allowed to [ignore](#) [11]. For Leonid Kesselman, Mikhail Khodorkovsky is Sakharov's modern equivalent: he too "is not forgotten".

Russians traditionally unite against perceived dangers, rather than for causes. Those, and there are many across Russia, opposed to President Putin see the famous prisoner in Krasnokamensk as a focal point of dissent and protest uniting the disparate voices of worry about the direction Russia is taking.

Valery Panyushkin says the imprisoned oligarch is still considered a threat by the Kremlin. Past experience, Panyushkin argues, suggests that could put his life in danger. Russian prisoners who unsettled the government often did not live to see the end of their sentences. Many died in bizarre circumstances long before they were due to be released from prison camps in the frozen expanses of Siberia.

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