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A Prisoner in Putin's Russia

Khodorkovsky's biggest crime was asserting political independence.

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Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former Russian oil tycoon who became a prominent political symbol in jail, will undoubtedly stay behind bars beyond the end of his current prison term next year. The news comes as no surprise. Russia's Vladimir Putin wanted him out of the way ahead of presidential elections due in 2012. A Moscow judge yesterday obliged by convicting Mr. Khodorkovsky on a fresh batch of embezzlement charges.

The verdict, in fact, is on Mr. Putin's Russia. The Kremlin again chose to flout the rule of law, the political opposition and human rights. Beginning with Mr. Khodorkovsky's arrest in 2003 on tax fraud, he has been the target of a political vendetta. Soon after taking power in 2000, the KGB colonel who became Russia's ruler set out to bring down some of the country's most successful businessmen.



Editorial Writer Anne Jolis on the Khodorkovsky verdict

As with most Russian fortunes made in the turbulent 1990s, Mr. Khodorkovsky bent the rules to build Yukos into an international oil power. His real crime, however, was to assert independence of the Kremlin, daring even to dabble in opposition politics. Offered a luxurious exile, he refused and lost his company and his freedom.

For all this, Mr. Putin has made Mr. Khodorkovsky an unlikely martyr to Russia's suppressed freedoms. Though popular in

polls, Mr. Putin has concentrated power in fewer hands today than at any time in the post-Soviet era. Corruption is rampant. It is an environment that scares away the investment needed to modernize this huge country. With Russians becoming frustrated, it is a recipe for trouble.

The Obama Administration prefers to err on the side of indulging the Kremlin, most recently with a nuclear arms pact that was hailed inside Russia. Expressing their concerns, President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton yesterday appealed directly to President Dmitry Medvedev while the court considers a sentence for Mr. Khodorkovsky. It is a display of hopefulness at odds with recent experience.

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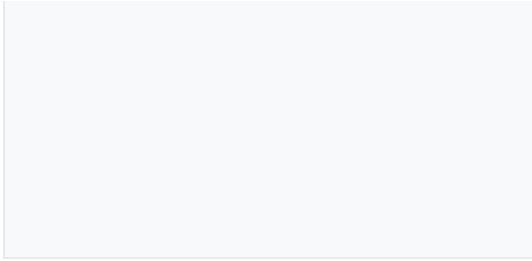
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