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<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/german-press-review-on-putin-and-politics-of-khodorkovsky-release-a-940661-druck.html>

Clemency 'A Master Stroke of Secret Diplomacy'

12/23/2013

By releasing Mikhail Khodorkovsky from prison, Russian President Vladimir Putin has eliminated a political burden that has dogged relations between Moscow and the West for years. German editorialists say it is a highly symbolic move ahead of the Olympics.

With his arrival in the German capital on Friday, former oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was granted clemency by Russian President Vladimir Putin and released from prison in a dramatic turn of events, has become one of the biggest political stories of the year in Berlin.

Dozens of reporters from around the world turned out on Sunday for the first press conference to be given by the newly free man. Khodorkovsky spent a decade in prison after being convicted in two politically driven trials that created tremendous international pressure for Putin, who has been accused by governments from Washington to Berlin of violating human rights.

There was much about the events of the past weekend that evoked the Cold War -- from the mere fact that a Russian political prisoner had traveled to Berlin, to the even more explicit symbolism of him giving a press conference at the site that was once the main crossing between East and West Germany. Former German foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who worked for the past two-and-a-half years to secure Khodorkovsky's release, is also a political veteran of that era.

In Berlin, the former oligarch said he has no immediate plans to return to Russia, that he will not fight to regain his shares in the oil firm Yukos, which the government stripped from him, and that he will not become politically active.

Khodorkovsky's release dominates the editorial pages of major German newspapers on Monday, where commentators largely argue that Putin released the former oil magnate in order to eliminate an unneeded political burden and to score points internationally ahead of the Sochi Winter Olympics. Putin also released the two women from the punk group Pussy Riot who were still serving time in jail -- Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova -- on Monday under a new amnesty law.

The center-left **Berliner Zeitung** writes:

"For Putin, the domestic risk of freeing Khodorkovsky had diminished recently. Two years after voter protests during the winter of 2011-2012, Putin is sitting firmly in the saddle again. He knows that Khodorkovsky's release won't reinvigorate the opposition and that this man isn't suited to become an opposition politician. Despite the solid reputation he built with his steadfastness in prison and in court, he is no politician. He lacks the charisma, the political nose and credibility with voters. Even if some have euphorically compared him to the South African, he's no Nelson Mandela. Khodorkovsky was the slick head of an oil company when he went to jail, not a freedom fighter. Nor is he a Yulia Tymoshenko, despite their similar backgrounds. By the time of her arrest, the Ukrainian gas princess had already long become a professional politician. Khodorkovsky could do a lot for Russian civil society with the authority he has gained as a prisoner, but he can't do much for Russian politics."

The center-left **Süddeutsche Zeitung** writes:

"The fact that Putin has now freed Khordorkovsky may be a German diplomatic success, but the Germans couldn't have had any influence at all had Putin not already decided that this was the moment to act and that he should take full advantage of that fact. He could use a few good headlines two months ahead of the Olympics in Sochi. But there's also the fact that after his triumphs this year ranging from (NSA whistleblower) Edward Snowden to Syria and Ukraine, Putin is feeling powerful enough to be able to get rid of an old burden that he is constantly reproached for."

"Khodorkovsky's renunciation, of (his former oil company) Yukos and of politics generally, shows two things: He knows he cannot win in a direct confrontation with Putin. A fresh attack would not only endanger him, but also numerous employees in management positions, who are threatened by trials at the hands of organized criminal networks. It was partly in order to protect those employees that Khodorkovsky signed the petition for clemency. And he understands as well that a man with Jewish ancestry who was a beneficiary of 'predatory privatization' is an extremely hard sell for Russian voters. Instead, he has chosen to think long-term and devote himself to building a more mature society. If nothing else, the past 10 years have shown that this is possible."

The conservative **Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung** writes:

"During the past year and a half, relations between Berlin and Moscow have cooled. The reason was increasingly open criticism from German politicians over violations of basic democratic principles ... that were first viewed with surprise in Moscow and then with increasing irritation. In Germany, this shift was of course highly disputed. Foreign policy specialists with the center-left Social Democratic Party held the view that more could be achieved with Moscow using a gentler tone than with loud demands that Russia respect human rights."

"Is the fact that Khodorkovsky has now been freed thanks to quiet work behind the scenes confirmation of this theory? No, because the public pressure was the prerequisite for the secret talks. As a prisoner, Khodorkovsky had become a political burden for Putin, because it wasn't just human rights groups that constantly raised the issue of the unjust verdicts against the former oil entrepreneur, but also members of parliament and senior members of European and North American governments. If Putin hadn't given Khodorkovsky amnesty ... a third trial would have been hard to avoid. But it would have required bending Russian law so much that it might have threatened the boost to his image Putin has enjoyed (due to Moscow's role in issues such as) Snowden, Syria and Iran in recent months and which he hopes to further bolster at the Sochi Olympics in February."

The leftist **Die Tagesszeitung** writes:

"People can speculate as much as they want about all the actors and the context of the release of Putin opponent Khodorkovsky, but it will take a long time, perhaps even decades, before all the details emerge of this master stroke of secret diplomacy. One thing is already certain though: The Khodorkovsky case proves that assertions that Edward Snowden cannot be taken in by Germany are nonsense. Legal experts have been saying this for some time now, but politicians like to ignore them. Now it is clear: If the political will is there, then there is no person who cannot come to Germany. In the case of the Russian government critic, the will is there, but not in the case of the former US intelligence agency worker."

"No one is claiming that Khodorkovsky got his billions entirely legally. But he was put on trial for political reasons and even just on the basis of humanitarian reasons, his release is grounds for celebration. Still, Edward Snowden didn't gain any advantages for his whistleblowing. He simply informed the world about a few things they had a right to know about."

"Snowden would like to live in Germany, but unlike Khodorkovsky, he's not welcome here. Why not? Because Washington, in contrast to Moscow, is an ally of ours? There may be good political reasons for rejecting Snowden. But if we do, then we also shouldn't make so much of our alleged respect for human rights."