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Putin Their Foot In: How the West helps spin for Moscow

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It is hardly a KGB secret that there is little love lost for Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Western media. In recent years he has been portrayed increasingly as an autocrat and an enemy of democracy. That same Western media has turned its attentions to imprisoned oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov as potential successors in 2008. Both are portrayed as strong Yeltsin-era liberals and victims of the politically motivated campaigns of Putin's Kremlin. But the Yeltsin-liberal label that garners so much praise in London and Washington may be the death knell of politicians in Russia. It is time for the West to rethink its conception of Russian politics, or risk pushing the country still further away from democracy.

The Not-So-Obedient Russian Press

Mainstream Anglophone media traditionally presents Russian politics as a power struggle between Putin's band of military-intelligence veterans and the liberal, business-friendly members of Yeltsin's old inner circle. That forced dichotomy was drawn into question this October with the acclaimed European launch of a controversial documentary film, *How Putin Came to Power*, which argues that Putin's ascendance to the presidency was the product of "enormous corruption" with the support of many of the crooked, supposedly "liberal" businessmen he now purports to oppose.

The film's co-writer, Paul Mitchell, does not understand what all the fuss is about. "There's really nothing shocking in it; the archive is all Russian sources. It has mostly all been reported before in the Russian press," he told the HPR. It seems such revelations are "news" only for foreigners. Russians themselves are accustomed to reports about Putin's alleged corruption and money laundering. This month, two influential national papers printed articles investigating Putin's links to organized crime and privatization scandals, including the appropriation of several government-issued yachts worth over \$100 million. The self-exiled oligarch Boris Berezovsky has even accused the president of running over a five year-old boy.

Yet not all bad things said about Russian politicians are true. Harvard Professor Marshall Goldman, an expert on Russian economics, told the HPR that such allegations must be viewed with extreme caution because the Russian media is rife with so called "black PR"—paid articles designed to compromise reputations. Warns Professor Tim Colton,

head of Harvard's Davis Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, "Get [the story] sorely wrong, and one of them might very well sue you for libel, which [former culture minister] Shvydkoi has already done." However, the paucity of such lawsuits points to a fact quite striking to Western onlookers—that there is still a certain degree of freedom in the Russian press. But while criticism of Putin enjoys considerable popularity, the pro-oligarch stories Westerners would consider anti-establishment are often viewed by Russians with suspicion and distaste.

Doing Putin's Dirty Work

Ironically, it is not the hounded Russian press but the Western media that may be undermining democracy in Russia. With their often-Manichaeic vision of the political scene and support for persecuted liberals and businessmen, Westerners may be engendering exactly the opposite opinions among Russians themselves. According to polls conducted by the Levada Centre, most Russians dislike liberals, oligarchs, and the Yeltsin family. They applauded the arrest of Khodorkovsky, and, indeed, a third of those questioned believed that his nine-year sentence was not severe enough. It seems that many Russians see a double standard in a Western media that expressed concern over Putin's imprisoning wealthy businessmen but was comparatively silent about the sufferings of the Russian populous under Yeltsin and his liberal regime: poverty levels rose to 41 percent, illness among newborns increased by 32 percent, and life expectancy fell to its lowest point in sixty years.

The perception, pushed both by state-controlled TV and the Kremlin's unlikely propagandists in the West, that Putin is separate from and opposes these reviled liberal elements is enough for many Russians to flock to him, his deeds notwithstanding. Perhaps Western journalists could use a lesson from their beleaguered Russian colleagues: the way to loosen Putin's grip on power is not to defend the oligarchs, but to condemn him as one of them