

## 7 Theories of Why Putin Freed Khodorkovsky

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“Deal or no deal,” brought to you by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Images mixed by Kevin Rothrock.

Andrey Illarionov is a former economic advisor to Vladimir Putin, a libertarian senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, DC, and a tremendously active blogger on LiveJournal. Illarionov has devoted special attention in his blog to Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s unexpected

release from prison last December, and his most recent piece on the subject itemizes several different explanations for Putin’s sudden decision to free his most notorious political foe.



Andrey Illarionov at the World Economic Forum in Russia, 2 October 2003, Moscow, CC 3.0.

Part of the motivation for Illarionov’s 3,240-word dissection [ru] of Khodorkovsky’s early release may have been Maria Baronova’s interview [ru] with Stanislav Belkovsky, which appeared in Slon.ru on December 31, 2013, where the latter called Illarionov “a good person, but not very smart,” in connection with Illarionov’s liberal views. In his LiveJournal post, Illarionov attributes to Belkovsky the first of seven prominent theories about why Putin pardoned Khodorkovsky, warning that Belkovsky’s explanation “shouldn’t be taken seriously or disseminated.”

The seven theories are these:

**(1) Putin showed mercy, generosity, humanism, and pity for Khodorkovsky’s sick mother, and therefore freed him.**

Illarionov rejects outright the idea that Putin has a merciful bone in his body. Repeating a phrase he coined in a December 22, 2013, post [ru] (also about Khodorkovsky’s release), Illarionov dubs Putin “KhZhL,” or “Хозяина железного ларца” (“Master of the Iron Box”), insisting that it’s simply implausible to argue that Khodorkovsky’s pardon was the result of a change of heart in Putin.

**(2) Khodorkovsky confessed his guilt, and was therefore freed.**

Illarionov credits Putin's press secretary, Dmitri Peskov, and TV personality and Khodorkovsky-critic Vladimir Pozner with propagating this theory. According to Khodorkovsky himself, however, the pardon request addressed to Putin contained no admission of guilt.

**(3) Khodorkovsky's release was a triumph of German diplomacy.**

Illarionov spends some time investigating this argument. Ultimately, he concludes that Putin selected the Germans as the formal mediators for Khodorkovsky's pardon both as a favor to Angela Merkel (who suffered some in recent elections) and for purely "technical reasons" (given that Hans-Dietrich Genscher happened to be the most recent of many figures who lobbied for Khodorkovsky's release). The reason to reject the idea that German diplomats actually spearheaded the pardon, Illarionov says, is that Genscher possessed no leverage over Putin that other, more powerful international figures lacked in past attempts to convince the Kremlin to release Khodorkovsky.

**(4) Putin wanted to send a signal to his entourage: "cool your jets."**

Illarionov attributes this theory to Khodorkovsky's interview [ru] with Evgenia Albats of The New Times, where Khodorkovsky argued that, in order to bring order to the ranks, Putin needed either to free him or to throw former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov in prison for corruption. Illarionov acknowledges that jailing Serdyukov would send a clear warning to Putin's people, but he concludes that there was nothing logical about freeing Khodorkovsky as a signal.

**(5) Putin freed Khodorkovsky to protect the Winter Games in Sochi and the Russian G-8 presidency in 2014.**

Illarionov confesses that he initially subscribed to this theory, though he's since come to reject it. Khodorkovsky's release came too late to lure hesitant world leaders to Sochi, he says, and the pardon came too early to have an impact on the next G-8 meeting in June 2014.

**(6) Putin was concerned about Russia's reputation as a democratic state.**

This is another theory Illarionov attributes to Khodorkovsky, with a parting shot again at Belkovsky:

Своим якобы демократическим характером помилование Ходорковского смогло потрясти воображение только такой впечатлительной персоны, как С.Белковский, без устали пытающейся мистифицировать публику регулярно повторяемой им мантрой про осуществляемую ныне «перестройку-2». Ни один сколько-нибудь серьезный наблюдатель как внутри страны, так и за рубежом ни на йоту не изменил своего мнения о характере современного российского политического режима.

With its supposedly democratic nature, pardoning Khodorkovsky could stir only someone as impressionable as Stanislav Belkovsky, who's tirelessly tried to bamboozle the public by repeating his mantra about the ongoing "Perestroika 2." No serious observer, either in Russia or abroad, would change his opinion one iota about the nature of modern Russia's political regime.

**(7) Putin and Khodorkovsky agreed to the "deal of the decade."**

Finally, Illarionov offers and endorses a seventh theory explaining the pardon: that Putin freed Khodorkovsky on the condition that the latter would endeavor to reach a reduced settlement in Yukos' suit in The Hague's arbitration court (where the Russian government faces being saddled with damages that could exceed 100 billion dollars). In the meantime, the Kremlin holds as hostages Platon Lebedev and Alexey Pichugin, Khodorkovsky's former Yukos colleagues, who remain in Russian prisons. Indeed, Illarionov bases the title of his LJ post, "The Abrek in the Kremlin," on Putin's supposed penchant for hostage-taking, comparing the President, known as "the German in the Kremlin," to the Abreks, a North Caucasian mountain tribe who fought the Russian Empire in the 19th century.

In comments [ru] on the blog post, readers challenged aspects of Illarionov's "deal of the decade" theory, questioning how a freed Khodorkovsky could be expected to convince Yukos' other shareholders (at least three of whom are not in Russia) to reduce their claim against the Kremlin. (Illarionov muses at one point that Putin would probably be willing to stomach a 30-billion-dollar indemnity.) Ultimately, though, Illarionov admits that Lebedev and Pichugin will be doomed to remain in prison forever, if Khodorkovsky fails in his task. Putin's terms to the former oligarch, Illarionov guesses, probably boiled down to, "It's up to you, it's your business, boy."