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No more Western hugs for Russia's rulers

By Mikhail Kasyanov, Vladimir Milov, Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov

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This year started quite symbolically in Russia. In the last days of 2010, government authorities decided to demonstrate their power and their intolerance for being challenged: The [verdict](#) issued at the farcical [trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky](#) and Platon Lebedev had no relation to jurisprudence; leading opposition figures were detained for as many as 15 days on purely political grounds.

These heavy-handed actions set a peculiar stage for [President Dmitry Medvedev's address at the World Economic Forum](#). Nevertheless, the intelligent and well-informed audience in Davos enthusiastically applauded his [nice words](#) about Russia's economic modernization and dynamic democratic development. International business leaders seem to accept his complaints that few Russians understand his great plans for the country's future, which greedy oligarchs and corrupt officials from the 1990s prevent him from undertaking.

It is obvious that Russia's economy and political system desperately need comprehensive modernization. But authorities' increasingly oppressive activities are following a different course.

Contrary to the wishful thinking many in Russia and abroad expressed when Medvedev took office - by de facto appointment - in 2008, his presidency has demonstrated no signs that his pro-democracy rhetoric might turn into real action. In fact, the opposite is true. This period was marked by increasingly restricted and falsified elections; war against Georgia; eased constraints on the use of armed forces abroad; the torture and [death in custody of Sergei Magnitsky](#), a lawyer for the police-raided investment fund Hermitage Capital; police lawlessness and corruption; and continued oppression of political opponents and dissent. European energy consumers have experienced supply cutoffs, just one form of Russia's open pressure on its neighbors. Blatant hooliganism of pro-Kremlin youth organizations is promoted.

Medvedev has invested himself personally in this plethora of misdeeds. Together with his mentor, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, he is directly responsible for numerous human right violations and further degradation of the political atmosphere in this country. He no longer deserves the benefit of the doubt. The question was asked at Davos in 2000 who Putin really is. It should be clear now to everyone who Putin and Medvedev are.

Parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place in several months, and the presidential election is due next year. But officials' authoritarian actions late last year suggest that future elections will not be better than previous ones - with winners appointed well in advance of the voting, a homunculus opposition pretending to fight while real opposition candidates are not allowed to run, election commissions producing the required results, and Western short-term monitors confirming that on Election Day all but a few minor things were okay.

The Russian power tandem has indicated that they will soon decide which of them would become the next

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president for the newly established six-year term or even two consecutive terms. Nobody is asking the opinion of the Russian people, who are to go, zombie-like, to polling stations to create the appropriate TV picture. This is how democracy is understood by Russia's ruling group.

In fact, were Russian authorities left to their own devices, this country's "elections" wouldn't be any better than the recent [performance in Belarus](#). And should that happen, Russia will lose its last chance for a peaceful return to the normal track of democratic development.

What can be done? We urge Western leaders to discontinue their kisses-and-hugs "Realpolitik," which has failed, and to stop flirting with Russian rulers - behavior that has not brought any benefits to the West and produces in Russia an impression that Putin's system is a decent one, like any other in the democratic world.

This is not just about choosing better keynote speakers for major international events. It means Western leaders must stop closing their eyes to Russian leaders' clear noncompliance with international obligations, especially concerning free and fair elections and basic human rights. It means the West should cease greeting Russian rulers as equals, providing them with legitimacy they clearly do not merit. It means the West should start exposing corrupt practices by the Russian establishment, whose ability to find havens for stolen funds and leave Russia for comfortable lives in Western nations is one of the regime's pillars of stability. It means Western nations should introduce targeted sanctions against the officials directly abusing the rights of their compatriots.

This won't be simple. Such measures would be vehemently opposed by Putin's team, by the growing clientele for the state-owned Gazprom-Rosneft, and by some businesses that prefer smooth, if murky, dealings with Russian authorities. But the stakes require nothing less.

As leaders of the united Russian democratic opposition, we urge the West to stop undermining our cause and compromising the very principles Western society is based upon. We are sure that we can achieve our goals through freedom and normal democratic process - provided we get these restored in our country.

The writers are co-chairs of the People's Freedom Party in Russia.

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