

Mr. Putin, Time Is of The Essence

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Hundreds of investors, including ExxonMobil CEO Lee Raymond and Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, sat in the conference hall. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes. Then Khodorkovsky lifted a cell phone to his ear, spoke in hushed tones for a few moments, and rushed out of the hall. Only then did President Vladimir Putin stride in, wearing a smartly cut suit and bearing a speech filled with promises to reduce bureaucratic barriers and diversify the economy.

Except for Khodorkovsky, the scene could have come directly from last week's St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. Nearly a decade stands between the St. Petersburg forum and Putin's appearance at the World Economic Forum in Moscow's Marriott Grand Hotel on Oct. 3, 2003. But the content of Putin's two speeches is strikingly similar. At both events, foreign investors raised the same concerns about state interference in the economy and the rule of law. And Putin broke a cardinal rule in both attempts to court investors: He was inexcusably late.

Participants at the World Economic Forum wondered whether Putin was running late because

he didn't want to be in the same room as Khodorkovsky, who was arrested just 22 days later. But it later emerged that Khodorkovsky's phone call and abrupt departure were connected to a police raid on a Yukos-funded orphanage. And we also now know that Putin is habitually late to most meetings — not just "fashionably late" as The Moscow Times forgivingly wrote in an article about the 2003 forum.

In St. Petersburg, Putin kept a hall packed with thousands of investors, including ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson, who replaced Raymond in 2006, waiting for 40 minutes. During the wait, a European CEO angrily complained that the Kremlin showed little respect toward investors. He and a top European politician had been made to wait five hours to enter the forum after a security glitch rejected their entry badges. "This would never happen at Davos," he said. "If the Kremlin wants to attract foreign investors, it must be better organized and respect their time."

The complaints continued when Putin arrived three hours late for a separate meeting with foreign CEOs, who were forced to wait in a narrow hallway.

"People are feeling insulted," said one oil company boss, according to The Wall Street Journal.

"The combined per-hour salary of all the CEOs here would match the budget of the forum for years," another was quoted as saying.

Obviously, foreign investors are not going to ignore Russia because Putin cannot make it to meetings on time. Russia offers tremendous opportunities, and Putin has made it easier to invest here. But his apparent inability to keep appointments does reveal a lack of respect for investors, for whom "time is money." Putin is overlooking a simple way to show investors that he values them. He should be on time.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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