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The Sultan of Sochi

By Aryeh Neier

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President Vladimir Putin's pardon of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his declaration of amnesty that has freed Greenpeace activists and two members of the punk rock group Pussy Riot are welcome gestures. But that is all they are: gestures.

Putin was most likely motivated, above all, by a desire to ensure the success of the upcoming Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. It is also likely that Putin sought to show the world a kinder, gentler face in an effort to consolidate victory in his tug of war with the European Union over Ukraine.

But although freeing a few people who were unjustly imprisoned for long periods is significant, it should not obscure the Russian government's ongoing major human rights violations at home and abroad. And here, little seems likely to change. Khodorkovsky's pardon does not look like the start of a Putin thaw.

For example, within Russia, a law that entered into force just over a year ago requires nongovernmental organizations that engage in "political activities" to register as "foreign

agents" if they receive any funding from abroad.

Yet many NGOs in Russia can survive only with foreign support. Potential domestic donors fear that they could suffer the same fate as Khodorkovsky, who was the leading Russian supporter of human rights groups until Putin imprisoned him for more than 10 years. Indeed, some Russian human rights organizations have been raided or shut down. The law essentially gives authorities discretion to close any organization promoting human rights.

Internationally, Russia is the mainstay of Syrian President Bashir Assad's brutal regime. Russia's diplomatic, financial and military support has ensured that Assad remains in power, despite his government's horrifying violence against Syria's people. Western governments are understandably reluctant to provide lethal aid for Assad's opponents, given the large number of jihadists among them and because important elements of the opposition have themselves committed severe abuses. Russia has no such inhibitions.

The Assad regime's indiscriminate attacks have forcibly displaced, injured or killed millions of noncombatants. By providing steadfast support to the Assad regime and blocking measures that would bring war criminals to justice, Putin shares with Assad culpability for the largest-scale atrocities in the world today.

It may seem to some that a forceful leader like Putin and a powerful state like Russia are impervious to pressure to respect human and legal rights. More than any other political leader today, Putin seems to embody the characteristics of the "sultanist" leader described by the German social scientist Max Weber a century ago. To the sultanist, the state and its functions become "purely personal instruments of the master." A figure like Khodorkovsky is imprisoned when Putin decides he should be imprisoned, and he is released when Putin decides he should be released.

Yet Putin's recent actions make it clear that even a sultan must periodically make certain concessions. Of course, it will not be so easy to secure policy changes on matters that are more important to Putin than the freedom of a few people who have irritated him. But the task is not hopeless, as the run-up to the Olympics has shown. Even someone as sure of himself and his power as Putin becomes susceptible to the pressure of international public opinion as soon as he seeks its approval.

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