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Richard Sakwa

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Putin and the Oligarchs

RICHARD SAKWA

During the election campaign and in his State of the Nation address of 8 July 2000, President Vladimir Putin talked of the need to break the cosy relationship between big business and government. In early 2000 Putin had talked, in language reminiscent of Joseph Stalin's plan in 1929 to 'liquidate the kulaks as a class', of his aspiration to 'liquidate the oligarchs as a class', stressing the need to create a level playing field. His central idea was that special interests, above all the oligarchs, should be kept 'equidistant' from the government. No longer were a select group of 'oligarchs' to have privileged access to the corridors of power or to hold the state hostage whenever the regime needed financial or other support. Putin's approach is neatly summed up in his interview with the Spanish media in early 2006:

Back in the mid-1990s oligarchic groups substituted for government in Russia. They were elected to parliament and lobbied laws beneficial for specific financial and industrial groups instead of the society. They also ensured fulfilment of these laws through their representatives in high places. I do not think this meets the public interest.³

The empirical analysis is probably correct, yet the policy implications that emerge out of such a view had wide ramifications. In this essay we will focus on three. The



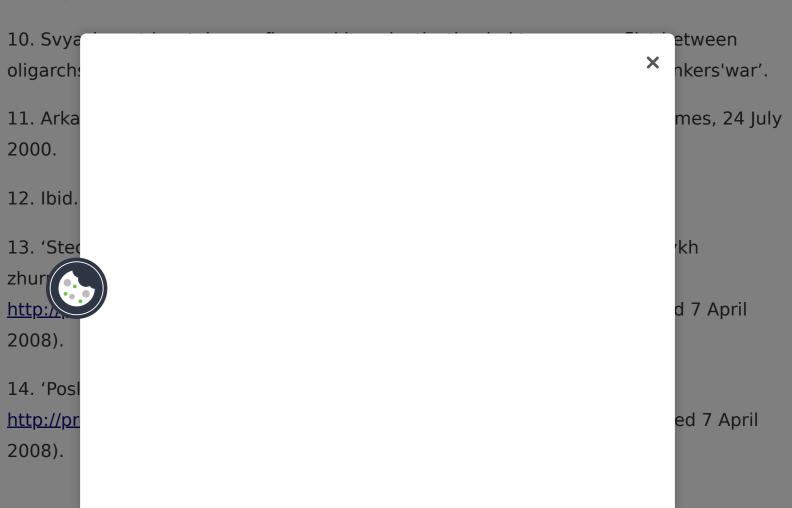


Notes

1. Interv

'Will Putin 27, fn. 5.

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- 3. 'Interv'yu ispanskim sredstram Massovoii, informatsii', 7 February 2006, http://president.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2006/02/101129.shtml (accessed 7 April 2008).
- 4. Cited by Stephen Fortescue, Russia's Oil Barons and Metal Magnates: Oligarchs and State in Transition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. xii.
- 5. See Paul Klebnikov, Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the Looting of Russia (Harcourt, 2000).
- 6. Moscow Times, 18 July 2000.
- 7. William Tompson, 'Putin and the "Oligarchs": A Two-sided Commitment Problem', in Alex Pravda (ed.), Leading Russia: Putin in Perspective (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 179–202.
- 8. For an analysis of this, see A.A. Mukhin, Novye pravila igry dlya bol'shogo biznesa, prodiktovannye logikoi pravleniya V.V. Putina (Tsentr politicheskoi informatsii, 2002).
- 9. Lilia Shevtsova, 'Whither Putin after the Yukos affair?', The Moscow Times, 27 August 2003, p. 7.



- 15. See Andrei Yakovlev, 'The Evolution of Business-State Interaction in Russia: From State Capture to Business Capture?', Europe-Asia Studies, Vol. 58, No. 7 (2006), pp. 1033-56.
- 16. Reported in El Mundo and Russian agencies, in Jamestown Foundation, Monitor, 14 July 2000.
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- 18. Fortescue, Russia's Oil Barons and Metal Magnates.
- 19. Andrei Piontovski, 'Russia's Misguided Democracy', The Russian Journal, 8–14 July 2000.

Additional information

Notes on contributors

Richard Sakwa

Richard Sakwa, Department of Politics and International Relations,

University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NX, UK.



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