

Gaining control of Russian Oil

Washington's efforts to depose Vladimir Putin and gain control of Russian Oil reserves

By [John Laughland](#)

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The fax-back service for pre-written newspaper articles must have been working overtime these last few weeks at Langley, Virginia. A flood of articles has appeared in the press attacking the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, especially in the wake of the Beslan massacre. They all have the same structure. Whenever you read the words, "Nothing can excuse the murder of children," you know that a big "But" is looming. Such articles invariably go on to explain why the murder of children is indeed understandable, and the reason usually given is Russian authoritarianism, against which the Chechen rebellion is natural and legitimate.[i]

During the reign of Chechen leader Djokar Dudaev, while Boris Yeltsin was president, and while the West was happily looting Russia, the Chechens were often described in the Western press as a bunch of bandits and Mafia gangsters. As recently as 2001, indeed, President Bush said that Vladimir Putin was a man he could trust – as if world leaders required or enjoyed such benediction from the world emperor. But those events are in the past, and Russia is now instead branded a dictatorship. Colin Powell gave an interview to Reuters on 14th September in which he berated Putin for rolling back democracy and instructed him to seek a political solution to the Chechen question, in whose cause schoolchildren had been shot in the back while trying to escape their captors. [ii] That the US administration has now formally turned against Russia, precisely at the moment when the terrorist threat against her is there for the whole world to see, both explains this sudden glut of articles by pro-US journalists and also poses the question: "Why?"

One of the articles, perhaps inadvertently, spilt the beans. The Chechen leader Ahmed Zakayev wrote in The Wall Street Journal on 29th September 2004 [iii] that

"The West has a clear choice. It can continue to support the KGB dictatorship of Mr. Putin, which sooner or later will turn against the West and side with its enemies through its strategic goal of undermining the "unipolar" world order and keeping oil prices high. Or it can change course and insist on resolving the Chechen conflict through negotiated settlement." (my italics).

In other words, the "negotiated settlement" in Chechnya, which the US Secretary of Defence, Colin Powell, has instructed the Russian government to seek, is the way to prevent Russia from ever counter-balancing the United States in world affairs, and to get the oil

price down.

Where is the connection? Chechnya borders Georgia, and Georgia, like Azerbaidjan, is on the fast track to join NATO. There are already hundreds of US troops in Georgia, training the local forces. They are there for two reasons: first, to protect the US-built Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline; secondly – and this follows from the first – to assist Georgia in recuperating her two secessionist territories, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It will not do to have Russia anywhere close to the pipeline, and she has troops in both these areas. Pushing Russia comprehensively out of the Caucasus, and humiliating her, requires victory for the Chechens. An independent Chechnya may also be the prelude to the longer-term break-up of Russia herself: the CIA predicted that oil-rich Siberia might escape Moscow's control in its report, *Global Trends 2015*, published in April. This imperative of getting the oil price down, and of establishing control over the sources and transport of hydrocarbons, and has become all the more urgent as the situation in Iraq deteriorates. Oddly enough, it was Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the now-imprisoned Russian oil billionaire, who first drew my attention to the true American war aims in Iraq, when Chris Sanders and I met him in September 2002.[iv] Khodorkovsky feared that if the US gained control of the Iraqi oilfields, it would pump out so much oil that the price would fall to \$12 a barrel. This, he told me, would destroy the Russian oil industry and Russia herself. His worst fears have gone unfulfilled for one simple reason: the unexpected tenacity of the Iraqi resistance.

This is why US strategists are now looking to make up for the mistakes they have so spectacularly made in Iraq. It is this, and not any real change in the internal political situation in Russia, which explains the West's turn against Putin: the West needs to gain control of Russian oil. The West's failure in Iraq is as striking as its success in Eastern Europe. The former communist states of Europe have now been comprehensively colonised by the US and its European allies. The political penetration of them is now total, as became clear in February 2003, when the US was able to call on heads of state and government in every single East European member of the EU and NATO to produce an open letter supporting the impending Anglo-American attack on Iraq, at a time when the whole of the rest of the world was lining up against it. Even (perhaps particularly) the Bosnian Serbs, whose terrifying 'nationalism' – according to the New World Order fairy-tale version of events – is supposed to have set the Balkans alight in the 1990s, have shown no desire whatever to get rid of the American military bases implanted in their midst since then. The fact that the height of Slavic resistance to the command "Jump!" is to ask for permission to smoke another cigarette first was undoubtedly the reason why American strategists were notoriously convinced that colonising Iraq would be 'a cakewalk'. Russia also presents the advantage of being the second or third largest producer of oil in the world (after Saudi Arabia and perhaps Iraq) and having the world's biggest reserves.

Simultaneously, efforts are being redoubled to crank into action the various pipelines which are supposed to transport Caspian oil to Western markets. One of these is the Brody pipeline which runs between the Ukrainian town of that name and the Black Sea port of Odessa (a Russian city but also in Ukraine). The Brody pipeline was initially supposed to take US-controlled Caspian oil to Western markets, but it has instead been pumping Russia oil, something the Americans do not like.[v]

So the New World Order strategists are determined to put their man in control of Ukraine, at the presidential election on 31st October. Huge influence, and presumably money, is being pumped in to ensure a victory for Victor Yushchenko. Paul Wolfowitz said in Warsaw on 5th

October that Ukraine should join NATO;[vi] Mark Brzezinski and Richard Holbrooke have rattled their sabres over Ukraine,[vii] and Anders Aslund, the architect of Yelstin's mass larceny, has eloquently outlined the West's strategic interest in that country.[viii]

These national strategic interests are, as ever, supported by the private interests of the powerful people lobbying for this new anti-Putin policy. They include people like David Owen and Jacob Rothschild: the former is Yukos' representative in Britain, the latter put up much of Khodorkovsky's original money, and sits (together with Henry Kissinger) on the board of the Open Russia Foundation, a Yukos front.[ix] They also include Anders Aslund, one of the signatories of the AEI's Open Letter, who works for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which is funded by Yukos.[x] Conoco Phillips – the strategic ally of Chevron, on whose board Condoleezza Rice sat for many years – has recently announced a "strategic alliance" with Lukoil, the second largest private oil company in the world,[xi] and Conoco Phillips is said to want a controlling stake in the Russian company.[xii] Before Khodorkovsky's arrest, indeed, it was said that he wanted to sell Yukos to an American company.

Cheap oil is a matter of life and death for the US, and it is a matter of considerable personal importance to many powerful people. The maintenance of a US-dominated unipolar world, especially in monetary affairs, is also an absolute imperative. Anything which stands in the way of these imperatives must be crushed – and Russia stands in the way of both.

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