
Report From St. Petersburg

Humpty Dumpty Went To Relax

by Roman Bessonov

Russian financial player Boris Berezovsky, now based in London to avoid an arrest warrant at home, has vowed to bring President Vladimir Putin down in a cloud of corruption scandal. The latest vehicle for his efforts is Ivan Rybkin, Berezovsky's former associate on the Russian Security Council. Running for President of Russia in the March 14 elections, Rybkin on Feb. 4 published a diatribe in the Berezovsky-owned daily Kommersant, in which he tagged Putin as the biggest "oligarch" of all and threatened to unveil compromising documents—kompromat—on the President in the near future. Our St. Petersburg correspondent relates how Rybkin's campaign, and Berezovsky's project, then took a tail-spin into farce.

According to a Russian proverb, if you are teaching a fool to pray, be careful: He may break his forehead.

Selecting Ivan P. Rybkin for the role of Presidential candidate, his patron Boris Berezovsky should have foreseen complications. Boris Abramovich viewed his protégé as a convenient tool, ready to fulfill any task for the boss. But Rybkin proved unable to cope with his assignment. As a rigid ex-Communist apparatchik, member of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation's Central Committee in 1993-94, Rybkin certainly knew what *kompromat* is and how to use it. But that was not enough.

What Berezovsky failed to foresee is a phenomenon well known in the Soviet *nomenklatura*, of which the London refugee had never been a part. In the top administrative circles, it was correctly believed that any personal quality of a functionary could be profiled and predicted—except for mediocrity.

During the election campaign, Rybkin was supposed to disclose sensitive information on the political past of President Putin, particularly from the early-1990s period when there was essentially no regulation of commerce, when Putin had to help manage the complex task of ensuring food supplies for St. Petersburg, Russia's second largest city. According to a report in *Novaya Gazeta*, Rybkin was soon going to pour a handful of dirt on the President, using the material from the recently published alarmist study by Jürgen Roth, *Gangsters From the East*.

In one of his own manifestos, Berezovsky had alluded to the existence of such documents, trying to attract the attention

of the public to himself and that of international law enforcement agencies to Putin. Those files, however, turned out to be warmed-over accusations from political enemies of Putin in St. Petersburg, channeled through the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.

Berezovsky needed something new. In December 2003, a St. Petersburg official told me that Boris Abramovich hired Kroll Associates to dig up more old dirt on today's President. It was easy to guess that Boris Abramovich would hire the most expensive agency, as well as the most prestigious.

Indeed, Berezovsky is scarcely cut out for his adopted mission of prophet-in-exile, out to save his country through its complete destabilization. He has remade himself with a British passport in the name of "Platon Yelenin," but he hasn't managed to kick the habit of competing to achieve new heights of comfort and luxury. When the name of his former partner and ally, oil tycoon Roman Abramovich, appeared on the list of Britain's richest individuals (Abramovich still lives in Russia, but he bought the U.K.'s Chelsea soccer club), Berezovsky hurried to purchase a prestigious mansion in the English countryside, with five guestrooms and a riding school. One imagines him strolling around the premises, waiting for the starting gun, when his candidate would officially be allowed to campaign.

Meanwhile in Moscow, the obedient mule Rybkin was getting ready for the race. But did he use new dirt from Kroll's prestigious investigators? It would appear that he merely went onto the Internet, instead—and with little skill, as might be expected of an old Communist bureaucrat. Looking for any connection of Putin and the oil trade (which would link him with Abramovich, whom Berezovsky wanted to hit with the same arrow he aimed at Putin), Rybkin must have typed just three words: "Putin," "oil," and "elections." Up popped a page from the irregularly issued newspaper *Limonka*, a production of eccentric "national-Bolshevist" Eduard Limonov.

In April 2000, *Limonka* had published, under the headline "Putin, Oil and the Elections," a typical provincial smear file, obtained from a then-candidate for the post of Governor of Leningrad Region. Executed in the classic style of a KGB agent's report, it said that "Vladimir Putin, along with Victor Cherkosov (at that time the President's Representative in the Northwest), had two meetings at the Japanese restaurant Shogun in St. Petersburg with two of their close friends, Vadim Somov, general director of the Surgutneftegaz-owned Kirishi Refinery, and Gennadi Timchenko, owner of the powerful IPP (International Petroleum Products) company, to discuss the promotion of Victor Zubkov, head of St. Petersburg City Tax Office, to the post of Governor of Leningrad Region." It was also mentioned that the powerful IPP was a major shareholder of a certain powerful "Russia" Bank, which is a pocket bank of Vladimir Putin.

The next idea that came to Rybkin was to find "Russia" Bank on the Internet. But the Web spat back a huge multitude of banks, related in some way to Russia. Getting nervous, Rybkin clicked on the St. Petersburg city property map at



Ivan Rybkin (left), the toady of oligarch Boris Berezovsky (right). Said Rybkin's wife, Albina, "Poor, Russia, if people like this are running for President!"

stockmap.spb.ru, where he found out that "Russia" Bank is 41% owned by Yuri V. Kovalchuk. This rang a bell! Recently he had read in *Izvestia* an interview with Mikhail V. Kovalchuk, director of the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Crystallography and Head of the President's Council of Science and Technologies. Finding both names on the website of the Northwestern Center for Strategic Research, Rybkin concluded that the two Kovalchuks were brothers. His not very rich imagination added that the two brothers were owners of two major, partially state-owned shipping companies—as the accounts of those companies were in the Bank of Russia. Which happens to be not "Russia" Bank, but Russia's Central Bank!

I am told that at the Northwestern Center for Strategic Research, headed by Prof. Yuri V. Kovalchuk, Rybkin's forehead-breaking "manifesto," in which the names of the two scientists stood together with Roman Abramovich and a shadowy power broker named Timchenko, aroused roars of laughter. At Russia Bank, the reaction was probably the same, especially when both Radio Liberty and *Novaya Gazeta* also confused the private medium-sized bank with a single branch office in Moscow, with the St. Petersburg office of the Bank of Russia (the Central Bank).

Timchenko, deputy general director of Kinex trading company, was probably laughing, too, since IPP, in which he (maybe) owns a stake, is a company of 11 (eleven) persons, ranking 39th in capitalization among oil trading companies registered in Finland, and owning only a 2% stake in "Russia" Bank. Timchenko should now be waiting for his name to appear on the *Forbes* list of wealthiest businessmen, no doubt

with a footnote—"according to highly informed sources from *Limonka*, issued in 2000."

Surgutneftegaz will probably sue Rybkin in London Court, entailing more unexpected expenses for his boss.

Rolling Out of Sight

All of Russia's special services might also file suit against Rybkin, since from Feb. 7 to Feb. 10 they had to search for him day and night.

After his disappearance the evening of Feb. 5, Rybkin's fate took center stage in the Russian and Western media, full of hints that the candidate could have been eliminated by Russia's security service, the FSB. Patriotic journalists and FSB men, on the contrary, believed Rybkin had been eliminated by his own boss in order to disrupt the Presidential elections. Meanwhile, a manager at the Ukraina Hotel in Kiev caught sight of Rybkin strolling along a corridor with two ladies. Then a Ukrainian Member of Parliament confirmed this information to the Interfax correspondent in Kiev. After that, the prodigal candidate called home, confessing to his worried chief of staff, Xenia Ponomaryova, that he was in Kiev for some R&R.

Ponomaryova looked far more pale and upset than three days before, when she had told the mass media that Rybkin was missing. "Was Mr. Rybkin ever pressured or followed in the streets by intelligence agents?" the press demanded. "No, I never had this impression," Ponomaryova said. As for Rybkin's wife, Albina, she exclaimed for all to hear, "Poor Russia, if people like this are running for President!"

Berezovsky's intonation suggested he would have been

more pleased, had his protégé really disappeared. “If what he is saying is true,” he grumbled, “then such a candidate does not exist.” Berezovsky’s *Kommersant* published an article depicting poor Rybkin as a clinical madman. The reason was obvious: At his press conference to explain what had happened, Rybkin held forth, “There is one force that would like to lock me up somewhere and keep me there till I turn blue, and this force would like to undermine the elections. There is another force that is interested in a legitimate result of the elections, and this force would like me to get physically eliminated.” In this way, Pinocchio exposed the master who had wasted so much time, money, and hope to carve him—and he still remained the piece of wood he had been to start with!

On Friday the 13th, a few days after his reappearance in Moscow, Rybkin turned up in London with an entirely new version of events. At a press conference organized for him by Berezovsky and the latter’s Chechen comrade-in-cash Akhmed Zakayev, Rybkin declared (reading from a piece of paper) that he had been expecting to meet in Kiev with fugitive Chechen rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov, mentioning the name of a certain Gekhan Arsaliev as having invited him to Kiev. There, he was allegedly served with tea and sandwiches, and suddenly felt very sleepy. He woke up in another flat, Rybkin said, with two armed guards who showed him “a terrible videotape” with his participation. While delivering this speech, Rybkin avoided looking into the camera, while Zakayev, from the audience, was drilling him with a fierce glance.

A Curious Turn

The emerging story turned uglier, and more ridiculous, than anyone could have expected.

Another Ukrainian source told the *Ukrainskaya Pravda* website that in Kiev, Rybkin met with Member of the Supreme Rada (Parliament) David Zhvania and was assisted by two Kiev businessmen, Igor Kerez and Sergei Bessmertny, who offered him tickets to various destinations and, finally, bought him one back to Moscow. Kerez is president of the Brinkford Co., headed by Zhvania before his election to the Supreme Rada. In November 2003, Kerez, in the capacity of vice chairman of the Board of Ukraine’s Congress of Ethnic Communities, went to Jerusalem as part of a delegation of the Eurasian Jewish Congress (EAEC). The EAEC is chaired by banker Alexander Mashkevich, originally from Kazakstan, formerly vice president of the legendary Seabeco Co. of Swiss-based shadowy dealer Boris Bierstein.

Bessmertny, after spending four years in jail for burglary, went into the energy business and today is a top wine trader, co-founder of Ukrvinservice Ltd. His relative Alexei Bessmertny is an importer of French underwear for well-to-do Ukrainian ladies. Brinkford’s David Zhvania, at the moment of his election to the Supreme Rada of Ukraine, was believed to be a representative of the interests of the famous Georgian thief-in-code, Zhaba Ioseliani (who died last year).

These semi-underground business circles would have been the “Ukrainian opposition” Rybkin was with in Kiev.

Ukraine’s Congress of Ethnic Communities includes the Chechen Community. Do Aslan Maskhadov and Gekhan Arsaliev attend the same sauna as the members of the Eurasian Jewish Congress? Who knows. The ways of public ethnic organizations are not necessarily very ecclesiastic. Even the St. Petersburg City Synagogue, during its reconstruction financed by the late Edmund Safra, had a sauna and a massage room installed. The contractor, Tenghiz Sepiashvili, explained to *Real Estate & Construction* weekly, “People can’t pray all the time, they also have to relax.”

Rybkin originally explained his behavior to Ponomaryova, over the phone from Kiev: “Can’t I relax for a couple of days on my own?”

Berezovsky’s devoted TV mouthpiece, anchorman Sergei Dorenko, was furious at this argument. “Rybkin needs to tell us in detail, what ladies he was spending time with there,” Dorenko said to *Kommersant*. He should have added: “and money.”

Berezovsky’s attempts to return to Russia’s political life have rebounded in a series of ideological intrigues, political scandals, and contract murders, which is likely to end—hopefully—in tragicomedy. The tragic clowns in this performance are three: Berezovsky himself, Rybkin’s spouse, and . . . the international *kompromat*-collecting community, exemplified by Radio Liberty, *Novaya Gazeta*, as well as the “mafologist” Jürgen Roth, who could scarcely have expected that the very politician who was supposed to make political use of his detailed criminal research, would be found in the embrace of the partners of one of Roth’s favorite characters, Boris Bierstein, and criminals from Georgia.

Collecting gallons of dirt on the leadership of Russia, human rights militants, police investigators and their intelligence patrons, in a dubious joint right-left effort, have been hoping that Berezovsky’s projects would help to undermine Putin’s grip on power. So far, the net result of his latest caper has been the thorough discreditation of his chosen candidate.

Clumsy attempts to put Rybkin (and the reputation of his boss) back together again are under way. On Feb. 13, Berezovsky’s former bodyguard Alexander Litvinenko, another “political refugee,” developed a new explanation: “KGB poisoning.” He claimed that Rybkin’s tragicomical sandwiches contained a “KGB medicine” named SP-117. If this were the case, and a soporific substance had caused sexual arousal (in a state of unconsciousness, no less) instead of sedative relaxation, then Litvinenko, representing the former KGB, should receive a Nobel Prize in pharmaceuticals. More likely, he deserves a special prize for lying.

In a popular anecdote originating in the Russian State Duma, a member of that body comes home quite drunk and asks his wife to bring a basin, as he is going to vomit. As she comes back with the basin, the beaming and relaxed husband says: “The conception has changed! I’ve done it in my pants.”