Amnesty must not mask reality of Putin’s Russia

From Prof Padma Desai.

Sir, President Vladimir Putin’s unexpected pardoning of jailed Russian tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky after 10 years in a labour camp has aroused widespread acclaim. Despite this top heavy charm offensive, two points need to be emphasised.

As president of Russia, a resource-based potentially rich country with high levels of education and a sophisticated culture, Mr Putin remains an egocentric, authoritarian ruler. In the old days, the tsars ignored the nobility (boyars) at their peril. Leonid Brezhnev, leader from 1964-1982, had to deal with the politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. By contrast, Mr Putin is an absolute ruler. The Russian legislature is his rubber-stamping body. Despite the amnesty measures, Russia remains a police state with widespread controls on internet activity and public meetings all unveiled under presidential executive orders.

Along with the amnesty, Mr Putin also dispatched first deputy prime minister Igor Shuvalov to the US recently with instructions to attract American investors in Russia. The economy, still dependent on oil exports, is in a sad state. Gross domestic product growth for 2013 growth will be around 1.6 per cent. Inflation runs at a high annual level of a little over 6 per cent. Most of all, the Central Bank of Russia estimated that unauthorised net capital outflows were $47bn in 2011 and 2012 and $22bn in nine months of 2013. These numbers imply that Russia is an unsafe investment destination.

No wonder that, following a virulent anti-American emphasis marked by the shutdown of US-supported non-governmental organisations and a failed invocation to lift the economy with Russian nationalism-inspired lessons, the Russian president has initiated liberal gestures. But will gestures countervail the stark reality of Mr Putin’s Russia?

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