



Wilfred J. Hahn is senior partner with *Hahn Investment Stewards & Company Inc.*, a global portfolio management firm. For more perspectives and resources on world economic and financial trends of interest to Christians, visit his website www.eternalvalue.com for additional resources and subscribe to the free newsletter, *Eternal Value Review: World Review and Market Monitor*.

The Rising Price of Obedience



Russian oil company, Yukos, has been in the news much over the past year. You may be familiar with its fate. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his former KGB *apparatchiks* effectively expropriated the prime assets of this, Russia's largest and most valuable oil company. It is a saga worth examining as it exposes a few of the key global power levers of our "last days" world and offers glimpses into some of the longer-running strategic developments in the global arena.

In the early 1990s, when the former communist Soviet Union had begun to dismember and Russia began its haphazard transformation towards free-market capitalism, a major wealth transfer took place. It was a remarkably quick heist. In a short time, major parts of Russia's national wealth fell into the hands of a few opportunists, many of whom were acting in cahoots with the existing political powers. Some observers refer to this period as the "Rape of Russia."¹ Vast tracts of Russia's natural resources and ownership stakes in state companies fell into the hands of a relatively few people for literally pennies — actually, fractions of pennies — on the dollar.

While Russia's citizens were facing the difficult struggles of a bleak economy, long breadlines, winters of fuel shortages and volatile politics, Russia — this former bastion of communism — produced some of the world's richest individual billionaires. A *Forbes* magazine survey of the world's richest people reports that Moscow, Russia's capital city, "now boasts more billionaires than any other city in the world."² More than a quarter of Russia's wealth is now concentrated in the hands of just 100 people, further states this report.

Greedy Worldwide Complicity

Not surprising is the one factor common to Russia's billionaires — all eight of them. Each made his or her fortunes, at least

partly, on the oil and gas business. The richest of them, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, controlled Yukos, Russia's largest oil producer; however, the value of his holdings is not worth much anymore. As mentioned, Russia's Putin-led government had decided to regain control of some of its former state-owned resource industries. Through manipulative means and bogus techniques, the Russian government engineered a takeover of a controlling stake in Yukos' major oil-producing subsidiary, Yugankneftegaz, by the state-owned firm Gazprom. By the end of 2004, Yukos' oil production arm, as well as other state-owned energy subsidiaries, was firmly in the grip of Gazprom.



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What does it all mean? Consider that Gazprom has emerged as one of the most powerful companies in the world, yet it remains a business still majority owned by the Russian government. It is the world's largest natural gas producer and virtually controls the economic lifeblood of Europe and most of the former Soviet Union. And now, with its grab of the Yukos' subsidiary at a ridiculously low price, it now also becomes a significant factor in the global oil industry (by some reports, accounting for 7 percent of world oil production). This company, which alone has accounted for more than 25 percent of all Russian tax revenues, has become a key policy instrument of Russia's leadership.

It is instructive to examine how Russia is reemerging to influence world affairs a little more than a decade after its apparent near collapse. President Putin makes no secret of Russia's ambitions in this respect. We do know that Russia has yet to play prophetic roles on at least two more occasions — pre-Millennium and just before the end of the Millennium. The Yukos affair points to at least three significant strategic developments:

1. Russia's growing links to Europe ... or rather Europe's growing reliance upon Russian energy supplies. After almost four decades of cowered existence under the threat of Russia's nuclear-tipped missiles, major European countries, most noticeably Germany, have again cozied up with this country. And little wonder. Russia has become the major supplier of energy — namely of oil and natural gas — to Europe. In fact, soon virtually 100 percent of Germany's natural gas imports will come from Russia. In return, Germany has emerged as a key financier and advocate of the new Russia, regardless of the dark maneuvers of this regime that is evident in various ways.

With Europe's steady eastward expansion, it increasingly may embrace more and more countries similarly reliant upon Russia. The post cold-war era is steadily advancing to a polarized West — the European Union striking a tone more and more independent from the United States. Why? Some discern this to be a result of unjustified anti-Americanism, others see it as a sign that America may find it to be ever more costly to support Israel.

2. Russia's growing influence upon the worldwide supply of oil and gas markets. While Russia's oil reserves may be near peaking, the nation nonetheless remains the second largest oil exporter in the world, just behind Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, however, has become a dangerously unstable country with many internal pressures, not the least of which include poor government finances and growing unemployment as a very high proportion of the population is under 25 years of age. Recently, Osama bin Laden (if his recent communications are verifiable) has begun to counsel that terrorist activities should be directed at domestic targets in Saudi Arabia rather than just those associated with foreigners.

While it would be impossible to make any reliable predictions, suffice it to say that energy prices are very vulnerable to more dramatic swings over the coming years. How high an oil price will American consumers tolerate before support for Israel will become a political hot potato?

3. The multinational company as a tool. It is more than interesting that the Russian government has decided to use a profit-making corporation as the



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means to implement its sovereign designs and to project its power upon the rest of the world. The shift in tactics is significant: A once-communist country that formerly suppressed private ownership now sees a publicly listed company as a powerful tool for the state's ambitions. This is no surprise. Multinational companies (all of which are inextricably linked into globalized financial markets in one way or another) as a group have become a powerful force in the world. Their rise to power is relatively recent in world history. Though the concept of a limited liability company may fight its roots 500 years ago, it is only in the last 50 years that the global multinational company network has emerged as a globe-spanning, world-influencing phenomenon.

Are Russia's maneuvers with Gazprom a confirmation of the powerful role of multinational organizations in a last-days world? Let's examine this question further. As we have documented the rapid appearance and rising influence of the multinational company, which has been discussed in previous issues of *Midnight Call* magazine, here we turn our attention to the broader question of just how these corporate as well as other-

worldly organizations come to mobilize so much power. It is a matter of obedience, but to whom?

Christian Obedience

Obedience is a central characteristic of the Christ-follower. The Bible clearly explains the importance of this trait, Jesus Christ Himself providing the strongest example. We are told that our attitudes, "should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place" (Philippians 2:6–9).

But just what does "obedience" mean? The word is derived from the Latin, *obēdire*, which means "to hearken to." The Bible uses the same concept: "Let him who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9). Hearing in this sense implies that one does what one hears. It is this connection that demonstrates true faith — doing what one hears to be truth. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the

message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). So, here we come to a very significant foundation of the concept of Christian obedience — hearkening to the Word of God. The Word of God is found in the Bible. We therefore see that the Kingdom of God functions on a discipline of obedience to the Word of God. Most crucially, however, the Kingdom of God is not of this world (or age). Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36).

Obedience in This Age

The successes of the kingdoms of this age also depend on the same discipline of obedience; however, these are all under the subjection of Satan, whom the Apostle Paul called the "god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4.4). He is similarly called the "prince of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30). His kingdom or power base is depicted as the highest of earthly mountains. When the devil tempted Christ in the wilderness, he took Him to a "very high" mountain from which to survey all the kingdoms of the world, saying, "All this I will give you if you will bow down



Of course, corporations in and of themselves are not evil. The corporate structure was and is a useful legal invention. And most certainly, there exist large corporate businesses that are admirable in their attempts to fulfill human needs. Yet, a new mode of world-spanning power structure has grown out of the multinational business model, one that is very recent in world history.

and worship me” (Matthew 4:9). Note this mountain can also be interpreted as the “highest” of earthly “mountains,” meaning that Satan’s realm on earth is the ultimate earthly power, therefore he controls all other earthly kingdoms of whatever type or group — sovereign, corporate or religious.

Good or bad, worldly kingdoms and organizations that depend on structures of rigorous human obedience can become mighty and powerful. Satan’s realm is based on this same hierarchy of obedience. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). In this verse, three different hierarchies are mentioned — rulers, principalities and ultimate authority (*arche*, *exousia*, and *kosmokrator*; respectively, in the original Greek). Furthermore, Christ alluded to their hierarchical obedience structure when He said, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can

his kingdom stand?” (Matthew 12:25–26).

We see that all successful earthly organizations and kingdoms have hierarchies dependent upon obedience and that they all work in unison toward certain objectives. They contrast with the Kingdom of God in at least three ways: 1) They presently pursue an earthly realm or kingdom. In contrast, God’s kingdom is not earthly; 2) They do not obey the Word of God, but something else — another person, another tradition, or another objective; and 3) Their reward is primarily or ultimately found in the physical world, or in this age, rather than in the eternal or the coming Kingdom of God upon earth.

Types of Earthly Kingdoms

Today we see a number of powerful systems and organizations that are concentrating worldwide power — religious, economic and political. All depend upon obedience.

Multinational organizations are certainly one of these types of hierarchies. They have strict hierarchy and highly defined “pecking orders.” Obedience is highly and lavishly rewarded, especially among the higher executive echelons. Failure or insubordination, on the

other hand, meets with quick discipline or severance. Just try pursuing objectives that do not line up with those established by any company or organization. You will not survive very long. And so, the multinational form of power flourishes, and likely will continue to gain power ... some even think to take on government role.

One law expert said, “Tomorrow’s state will have as much in common with the 21st-century multinational company as with the 20th century state.”³

Of course, corporations in and of themselves are not evil. The corporate structure was and is a useful legal invention. And most certainly, there exist large corporate businesses that are admirable in their attempts to fulfill human needs. Yet, a new mode of world-spanning power structure has grown out of the multinational business model, one that is very recent in world history. The recent Yukos saga in this sense is a key sign of the times. The large corporation can carry power even on the scale of what the Bible calls “kingdoms.” It also signifies the power of “obedience” or the danger of misapplied obedience.

Misdirected Religious Obedience

Obedience can be misdirected in religious circles, especially in



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those religious institutions that see their “kingdom” in this age and seek their might from such an earthly establishment. More than a few examples could be cited, including Protestant organizations. However, the Roman Catholic Church without a doubt is the most successful and enduring multi-national organization ever built on earth. Like other successful establishments, it is built upon a rigorous hierarchy of obedience. Anyone who has read Ignatius Loyola’s call upon obedience in his Constitution of the Society of Jesus will understand how important and powerful this principle was to the success of the Jesuits, which he founded. In fairness, not all branches of the Roman Catholic Church ascribe to this degree of blind obedience that Loyola demanded.

All the same, the Roman Catholic Church provides a clear example of the effectiveness of obedience and complete dedication. It is a matter of record that the Jesuits have done much good in the world; however, Loyola placed this society’s ultimate obedience in the papacy. The Roman Church claims an earthly kingdom and power base, using its instruments of influence to perpetuate an earthly kingdom that declares to be the only true church and the spiritual inheri-

tor of Israel’s promises. According to Roman Catholic doctrine, obedience must align with “Church Tradition” and the teachings of the Magisterium. As the rulings and teachings of the Magisterium are held as equivalent to the Word of God, though they may in fact contradict or supersede previous teachings or Bible Scripture, it cannot be correctly said that its “hearing comes by the word of God.” As such, though part of the Church will include people who consider themselves Catholic adherents, the Roman Catholic institution clearly defines itself as being obedient to its “high mountain.”

Points to Ponder

Whereas Christ has been “exalted to the highest place” in the Kingdom of God (Philippians 2:9), the world of this age obeys and exalts the “god of this age.” When Satan tried to barter for Christ’s obedience, Jesus replied, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’” (Matthew 4:10). We are to obey the Lord God, whose kingdom at this time is found in the hearts of men and women upon earth.

On the other hand, disobedience is a hallmark of the last days. Second Timothy 3:1–5 mentions that the perilous times

of the last days are characterized by, among other things, “disobedience to parents” and “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.” Not loving God is disobedience, since “This is love for God: to obey his commands” (1 John 5:3).

Though we live on earth, how, then must we be obedient? Paul gives us a ready answer: “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete” (2 Corinthians 10:3–6). (MC)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Williamson, Anne. The Rape of Russia. Testimony before the Committee on Banking and Financial Services of the U.S. House of Representatives, presented Sept. 21, 1999.
- 2 *Forbes Magazine*, May, 2004
- 3 Bobbitt, Philip: How market-states can meet global challenges. *Financial Times*, September 7, 2004.