

Bout Illustrates Why Putin Will Fail

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When a U.S. jury last week convicted Viktor Bout, the so-called Merchant of Death, of conspiracy to kill Americans and selling weapons to a terrorist organization — a crime that carries a sentence of 25 years to life in prison — Russian authorities reacted with anger.

The Foreign Ministry stated, “The guilty verdict was delivered ... under unprecedented political pressure by U.S. authorities.” The ministry has created a “Bout’s list” of U.S. citizens who would be denied entry to Russia for allegedly violating the human rights of Bout and other Russian citizens. It is also seeking Bout’s extradition to Russia.

Even former U.S. Communist leader Angela Davis, whom the Kremlin claimed was persecuted in the early 1970s by U.S. authorities, never got this much support from Moscow.

Bout was caught red-handed agreeing to sell an entire arsenal to two men posing as members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as FARC. The insurgent group is classified as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union. Bout offered to sell them millions of dollars worth of weapons, including 700 surface-to-air missiles, armor-piercing rocket launchers and AK-47 rifles. This is almost as many weapons as the United States provided the Afghan rebels when they fought Soviet forces in the 1980s.

Clearly, the decision to supply Colombian drug terrorists with this amount of weapons could only have been made with the participation and blessing of senior officials in the Russian government.

What's more, when Bout flew to Thailand for negotiations with the supposed FARC representatives, he was recorded as telling them, "We are together, we have the same enemy. I've been fighting the United States for 10 or 15 years." The FARC envoys turned out to be U.S. undercover agents. Bout was arrested, extradited to the United States and convicted.

Only the Russian state has the right to sell arms, not individuals. The question is: Which agency or department was Bout representing when he agreed to sell drug terrorists a major arsenal of Russian weapons? And if it was not a department but a highly placed corrupt official, what was his name?

And what did Bout mean when he said, "We have the same enemy?" Officially, Russia and the United States are on relatively good terms. And which senior official has decided that Russia can partner with drug dealers and terrorists?

Moscow has yet to offer any answers to those questions. Instead, the Foreign Ministry issued a statement that sounds more like a note slipped through a prison window telling the prisoner: "Don't worry, brother. We'll get you out of this joint one way or another."

There is one important detail to this story: The Foreign Ministry did not immediately defend Bout following his arrest. This suggests that the plan to supply FARC with weapons was not authorized at the very top — that is, by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin — but by people close enough to the national leader to appeal directly to him for help when they got into trouble.

This is yet another reason why the current regime will ultimately collapse. It never punishes those guilty of serious crimes, whether it is Bout or those responsible for the death of Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky. If a crime is exposed publicly, the regime only intensifies its support for the criminals. As a result, such crimes only increase in number and severity, law and order deteriorates ever faster, and the Russian state shows the world that it is a sponsor of notorious arms dealers who sell to drug traffickers and terrorists.

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