The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kobzon Ready to Take One Last Crack at U.S.

By Alexander Bratersky

March 14, 2012



Iosif Kobzon performing during a 2007 concert for State Duma deputies. **Vladimir Filonov**

A crooner adored by millions around the former Soviet Union, seasoned politician Iosif Kobzon was once called "Russia's Frank Sinatra."

But the analogy wasn't born simply out of admiration. It is also a reference to Sinatra's legendary mob ties, a connection Kobzon shares — albeit with the Russian mafia — and which has been used as grounds to deny him a U.S. visa for more than a decade.

But the charismatic singer — who still occasionally sings with his trademark baritone — says he will try one last time to get a visa for a possible farewell concert tour for America's Russian population in May.

"It is the main intrigue of the day whether they will let me in or not," Kobzon told The Moscow Times on Wednesday, a day before his scheduled appointment at the U.S.

Embassy. "It will be the last time, and I won't ask again."

The tour's promoter, the Russian-American Consulting Corp., which is headed by Andrei Shuranov, a former Russian diplomat to the United Nations, says it is optimistic, as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has given a green light for the singer's arrival.

In trying to facilitate Kobzon's visa, the company even organized a petition signed by 4,000 Russian-Americans addressed to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

But Doron Bard, the U.S. consular section chief in Moscow, told the organizers that Kobzon's request will still be carefully reviewed.

Kobzon's visa saga started in June 1995 when his multiple-entry visa was revoked by the U.S. Embassy on suspicion that he was connected to Russian mafia dons operating in the United States.

A letter signed by the then-head of the U.S. consular section, Andre Goodfriend, said a visa could be denied to anyone who might enter the country to participate in "unlawful activity" and cited the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act.

The letter also cited another provision stating that it is prohibited to issue a U.S. visa to anyone believed to traffic in "illicit" material or aid someone else in doing so.

The denial came soon after U.S. media reports labeled Kobzon a "tsar of the Russian Mafia" because of his friendship with the late mobster Vyachaslav Ivankov, also known as Yaponchik, who died after being gunned down in 2009.

Kobzon — recently elected for the fifth time to the State Duma — has never denied that he and Ivankov were friends but insisted that he was never involved in illegal activity.

"I have many gay friends. But does that mean that I am gay? I know many artists who know the same group of people," Kobzon said.

Kobzon said he frequently travels to Europe, including England, and he has grown used to the scrutiny at airport security checkpoints.

"I have gotten used to the fact that they study my passport and then run to their superiors. That's why I prefer to stand at the end of the line," he said.

The singer said he believes the mob accusations against him were part of a conspiracy by Boris Yeltsin's top bodyguard, Alexander Korzhakov, who went after the singer for supporting arch-rival Yury Luzhkov, who was then Moscow's mayor.

Ironically, Korzhakov later published a tell-all book about Yeltsin and became a United Russia party official, serving in the State Duma alongside Kobzon.

Korzhakov was not available for comment.

Yeltsin's daughter Tatyana Dyachenko wrote on her LiveJournal blog in 2010 that Korzhakov told her father that both Luzhkov and Kobzon had ties to criminal groups.

"Kobzon became an involuntary victim of Korzhakov's attack," said Dyachenko, while insisting that the allegations against the singer were "fake."

Kobzon has tried to clear his name in international courts but without success.

He also said Russian officials, starting with former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, former Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and Sergei Lavrov have all tried to lobby their U.S. counterparts without luck.

"Sergei Ivanov has even played some of my songs to Colin Powell, who said such a singer couldn't be a mafia guy," Kobzon said, referring to the former U.S. secretary of state.

"Since then, seven of my grandchildren were born, so the Kobzon family is getting larger," he said, noting that all of his relatives have been barred from the United States as well.

In 2000, Kobzon did receive a short-term visa as a member of a Duma delegation visiting Harvard University. But he said his American hosts followed his every move, so he decided to return to Moscow after a couple of days.

"I don't like being dressed down. Here I am not afraid of anyone — the government, criminals or the president," he said.

Kobzon, who recently announced that he is battling with cancer, said he is anxious to get to the United States one more time.

"I don't have much time left," he said at a recent news conference.

In September 2010, Kobzon was the only senior United Russia official to defend his friend Luzhkov when he was fired by President Dmitry Medvedev for a "lack of trust."

With United Russia's survival in question, Kobzon is eager to leap to the party's defense, saying it is the only existing political force that "has the resources" to carry out reforms in the country.

"Maybe it has lost popularity, but there is no other party which can be competitive with United Russia. It is the only party that has material resources, control over media and television. Maybe this is wrong. But what is right?" he said.

But while Kobzon might be positive about his visa chances, he has no illusions about his daily work as a party lawmaker.

"I am ready to say everything, but I know that if my proposal does not agree with the party line, it will not be voted for." he said. "That's why I try not to waste my time on the plenary sessions. It is useless. It is like being an artist who applauds himself."

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