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Kremlin Will Pay Dearly for Viktor Bout

By Georgy Bovt

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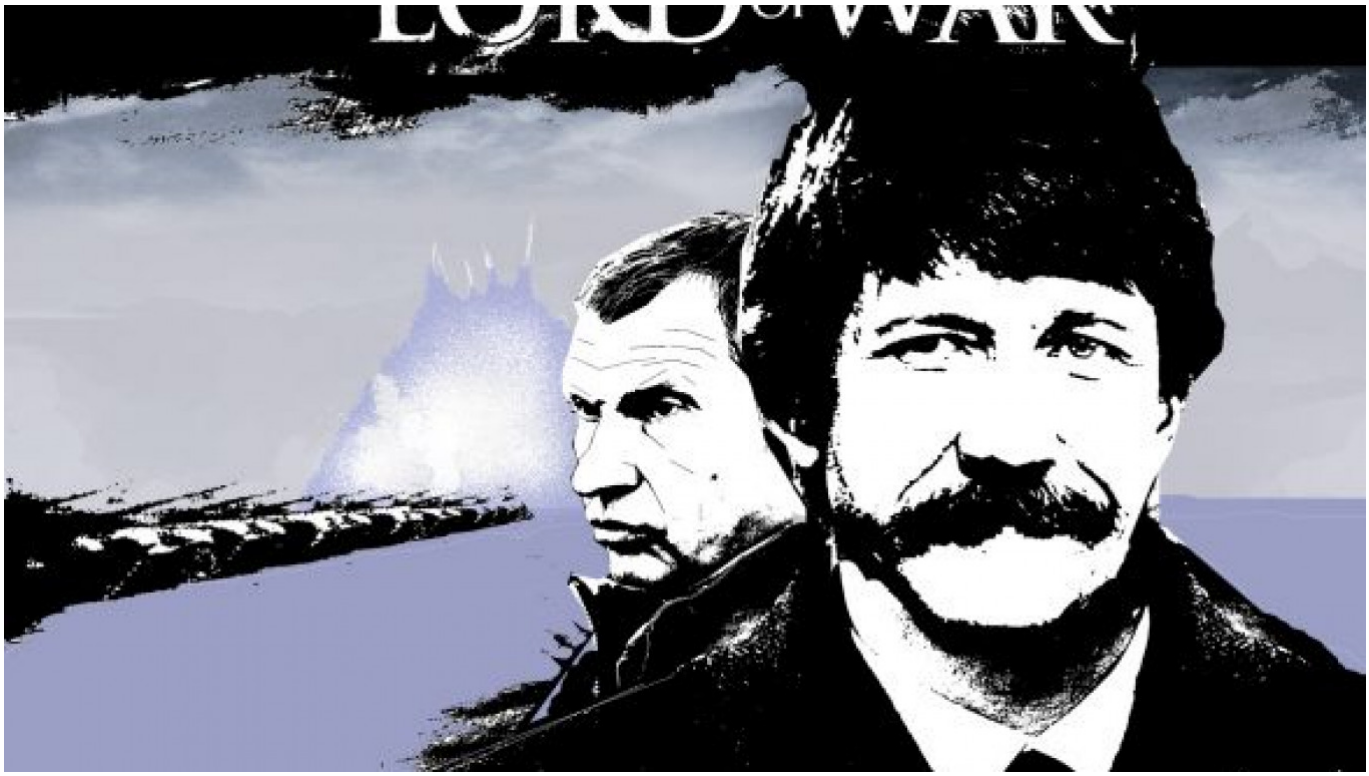

The Russian government has probably never gone to such great lengths to defend a citizen who ran into trouble abroad as it has for arms dealer Viktor Bout, whom a New York court last week sentenced to 25 years in prison.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov responded by saying he would take up the issue of the Bout case with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The Foreign Ministry press service went even further, issuing a special statement declaring that the case would become a priority in U.S.-Russian relations. It would be no surprise if outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev or President-elect Vladimir Putin expressed their dissatisfaction over Bout's fate as well.

Moscow insists that the case is politically motivated. The implication is that the U.S. court delivered the verdict on orders from the State Department because Bout had been selling arms against Washington's wishes and because jurors had likely seen the 2005 Nicolas Cage film "Lord of War," which depicts an arms dealer who is a thinly veiled version of Bout. As a result, the jurors were swayed by the film character's obvious guilt.

Russian officials find it especially irritating that Bout was detained by a third country

and extradited to the United States to stand trial. Those who argue that Washington is trying to play global policeman point to the Bout case as evidence.

It is almost impossible to find a single report in the Russian media explaining why Bout was given such a lengthy sentence or mentioning the fact that the prosecution actually sought life imprisonment. As a rule, Russian reports mention only that Bout was planning to sell two cargo planes to either drug lords or guerrillas in Colombia. They conveniently fail to mention that Bout also promised to sell his clients about 100 surface-to-air missiles to be used against U.S. helicopters fighting Colombian insurgents, 20,000 AK-47 automatic rifles, 20,000 rounds of ammunition for grenade launchers, 740 mortars, 350 sniper rifles and 10 tons of C-4 explosives for a combined total price tag of $20 million. All of the arms could have been used to kill U.S. forces helping the Colombian government in their fight against drug lords.

The undercover operation against Bout lasted five years and ended when U.S. Drug Enforcement agents posing as Colombian buyers lured him from Moscow to Bangkok. Bout's longtime associate Andrew Smulian agreed to cooperate with investigators and provided evidence incriminating Bout.

Bout's entire defense was based on the argument that his promise to sell weapons did not prove his intention to actually do so. However, Russian authorities often use the same tactics to entrap criminals, and Russian law considers it a punishable offense to make preparations for a crime, even if the final act is never carried out.

Why did Russian officials — clearly following orders from their superiors — come to Bout's defense? The answer can be found in Bout's past: He served as a military adviser in Angola at the same time as current Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin — although Bout has never admitted to knowing him. Soviet military advisers held close ties with the secret service and, following the Soviet collapse, it was probably those connections that enabled Bout to create a private transportation company with heavy cargo aircraft.

His arms sales business gradually expanded to include many of the world's hot spots. Bout specialized in selling weapons to countries under UN embargo and thus became the object of an embargo himself.

We will probably never know exactly how Bout was able to secure and sell such volumes of Soviet-era weaponry. But we can be certain that no ordinary private businessman could have accomplished it without very highly placed friends and patrons who shared in the $6 billion that U.S. investigators estimate as Bout's total worth. Even a far less war-oriented business would be impossible to carry out on such a scale in the CIS without the help of senior government officials. If that is the case, Russia's persistent appeals on Bout's behalf might reflect more than unhappiness over Washington's treatment of a former Soviet officer — and far more powerful interests than the official indignation of the Foreign Ministry.

Because Bout refused to cooperate with U.S. authorities, his highly placed Russian patrons do not consider him a traitor, as they did former Federal Security Service agent Alexander Litvinenko, who was found dead from poisoning in London.

For its part, the United States either did not investigate the money and weapons trail behind Bout's operations or chose not to disclose that information to avoid further aggravating

relations with Russia and violating unspoken rules governing the global arms trade.

In theory, Washington could hand Bout over to Russia based on the 1983 Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons, a document to which the United States is a signatory. That convention has been invoked only once in U.S.-Russian relations: UN employee Vladimir Kuznetsov, convicted by the United States on money-laundering charges, was repatriated to Russia in 2007.

However, because Moscow maintains that Bout is completely innocent, Washington might refuse to extradite him out of concern that he would only be set free. This is all the more possible given the recent precedent, in which, following lengthy negotiations with Moscow, Qatar extradited two Russian secret service agents given the death sentence for killing Chechen separatist leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev — only to see the pair welcomed home as heroes. Nobody doubts that the two were given their freedom and never spent a day in a Russian prison, despite Moscow's official promise to punish them.

One thing is certain: The Bout case will remain on the U.S.-Russia agenda for a long time, although negotiations might eventually shift from public posturing to backroom deal making. Moscow has a great desire to get Bout back, and I think Washington is not opposed in principle to satisfying that request. It would not be the shadiest deal ever cut in international relations, but it would probably come at a very high price for Russia. After all, the few senior Russian officials who know the true value of the secrets that Bout is holding would be willing to pay dearly to make sure that Washington never learns more than it already knows.

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