

Lavrov Says Russia Won't Retaliate After U.S. Visa Denial for Kobzon

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov speaking in an interview with Russia 24 television Friday.

Moscow is deeply unhappy with Washington's decision to deny a visa to singer and lawmaker Iosif Kobzon, but won't retaliate by barring U.S. artists from entry, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in an interview published Saturday.

"We are probably more polite regarding artists — if a person does not have a palpable criminal record, we will never act like this" Lavrov told state-owned Russia-24 television, according to a [transcript](#) on his ministry's website.

Kobzon, a legendary Soviet crooner and State Duma deputy for the ruling United Russia party, was denied a visa to the United States earlier this week. He has been unable to visit the U.S. since 1995, when his visa was revoked on suspected mafia ties, except for a brief trip in 2000 as part of an official delegation.

Lavrov said the latest refusal was based on accusations of organized crime links and "apparently" also of drug trafficking, but said they were unfounded and stemmed from "stereotypes and phobias" among U.S. authorities.

He added that Moscow had lobbied for Kobzon "at the highest level" and that he had raised the subject many times with U.S. Secretaries of State Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton.

He said the decision was especially unpleasant because Kobzon, who turns 75 in September and is ill with cancer, wanted to mark the upcoming May 9 Victory Day in the U.S. "The denial contradicts common sense and rapprochement between our peoples," he said.

The Ukrainian-born Kobzon admits knowing criminal figures like the late Vyacheslav Ivankov, but insists that he was never involved in illegal activity. A longtime close ally of former mayor Yury Luzhkov, Kobzon was elected to the Duma for the fifth time in December.

Critics have long accused Moscow of harboring international criminal figures. Prominent mafia bosses Semyon Mogilevich from Ukraine and Tariel Oniani from Georgia lived quietly in Moscow for years before being arrested in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

Despite the Kobzon affair, Lavrov praised ties with the U.S. by saying both countries have "reached a level of cooperation unseen in previous years." As examples he singled out the wide-ranging presidential commission and joint projects like the Skolkovo foundation.

But he added that the relationship was constantly challenged by "ripples" stemming from Washington's finger-pointing at Russian democracy.

Lavrov complained about a "lingering American mentality to always and everywhere seek levers to pressure its partner by raising human rights and democracy." This, he said, "verges on interference in internal affairs."

The foreign minister also indicated that he does not expect to lose his job after Vladimir Putin takes over the presidency on May 7. "I am not planning to make any decisions myself — I prefer to work. And to work under the president's leadership," he said.

Lavrov has been in office since March 2004, making him the longest serving foreign minister of post-Soviet Russia.

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