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U.S. Rock Group Ignites New Tensions

By Natalya Krainova

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The performance of popular U.S. rock band Bloodhound Gang was canceled over the weekend after one of its musicians shoved a Russian flag into his underpants at a concert in Ukraine, prompting outrage from Russian officials and calls for an investigation into the possibility that the flag fiasco was "ordered" by a higher authority.

The latest came Sunday as United Russia Deputy Sergei Neverov demanded that prosecutors get to the bottom of "who paid the group to desecrate the flag" at Wednesday's performance in Odessa, RIA Novosti reported.

At the concert, bass player Jared Hasselhoff withdrew and showed to the audience two objects: first a blue-and-yellow Ukrainian flag, and then a Russian white-blue-and-red flag, showing them one by one to the crowd. The audience cheered for their national flag and booed the Russian banner.

Seeing the crowd's negative reaction to the Russian flag, Hasselhoff, in an apparent attempt to earn the fans' approval, said, "Don't tell [President Vladimir] Putin," then unzipped his

pants, shoved the Russian flag into his underpants in the front and pulled it out from the back.

He then threw the flag into the audience.

The band's frontman, Jimmy Pop, immediately defended the Russian symbol, saying he "disapproved" of Hasselhoff's prank because Russia was "better" than the United States.

"America sucks like every ex-girlfriend I ever had," Pop said.

A day earlier, Hasselhoff urinated on the Ukrainian flag at a concert in Kiev, media reports said. A video of that incident was also posted on YouTube, but no reactions of Ukrainian officials or public figures have been reported.

The Russian reaction, on the other hand, was severe. The band members' vehicle was pelted by rotten eggs and tomatoes, and the band members themselves were attacked in the airport in Anapa before leaving Russia, where they were scheduled to headline a music festival.

On Friday, Russian Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky announced on Twitter that he had persuaded Krasnodar region authorities to ban the band from performing at the regional music festival on the same weekend.

"Rock group Bloodhound Gang are packing their bags," Medinsky tweeted. "These idiots will not perform in Kuban anymore."

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And it was not only Russian officials condemning the stunt. U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul wrote on his Twitter on Sunday that the band's prank was "disgusting," but also said he condemned the violence against the musicians.

After the performance was canceled, Hasselhoff apologized to Russians at a news conference, saying it was the band's tradition to throw things to fans from the stage for souvenirs after shoving them through his pants.

"Everything that comes on to stage has to go through the bass player's pants," Hasselhoff said, Interfax reported in Russian. English-language reports could not be found.

Krasnodar region Governor Alexander Tkachyov said "such things can't be forgiven," however, urging the band to "wipe up [their butts] with their apologies" on Twitter on Saturday and calling them "bastards."

He called on the Russian managers of the group to "boycott them for life."

And taking it a step further, Tkachyov praised the acts of violence towards the band, saying he was "really delighted" with the reactions of young activists, though he also said it would've been better if the band members had been jailed.

In accordance with Russian legislation, they could have been. Desecration of the Russian flag is punishable by up to a year in prison.

Regional police interviewed Hasselhoff over the prank and passed case materials on to

prosecutors so that they could decide whether to open a criminal case, Interfax reported.

The Federal Migration Service cut the band's stay in Russia short, and the musicians left the country late Saturday, Interfax reported.

But the outrage still lingered. Several senior State Duma deputies vehemently condemned the band's prank over the weekend.

Apart from lawmakers, Maxim Rudnev, head of the coordination council of the Young Guard and head of the youth branch of the pro-Kremlin party United Russia, called for the band's imprisonment, saying "a cage is the place for monkeys," he said by telephone.

Rudnev also suggested that someone "shoved" the flag into the musicians hands and "hinted" what they should do with it. The youth leader urged investigators to consider this possibility.

Even formerly outspoken cultural figures who themselves were prosecuted for offending the feelings of Russians praised authorities for canceling the band's performance, but they also called for the abolishment of criminal prosecution for desecrating Russia's state symbols.

Yury Samodurov, former director of the Sakharov Center and organizer of the exhibits "Caution, Religion!" in 2003 and "Forbidden Art" in 2006, both of which were later banned, said the musicians should be banned from performing in Russia not because they desecrated the flag, but because Hasselhoff's act of shoving the Russian flag through his pants lacked any symbolic meaning.

"I respect people who can burn a Russian flag to express their protest to the state," Samodurov said by telephone.

"But if someone does something that he can't explain, he is feeble-minded and we don't need concerts of idiots," Samodurov said.

On the other hand, if the band didn't mean to offend anyone, Samodurov said, but just wanted a publicity stunt, they should not be criminally prosecuted; they should be allowed to go peacefully.

Lena Hades, a painter who had a criminal case closed against her a few years ago over allegedly desecrating the Russian emblem — the two-headed eagle — in her paintings, said the criminal charges for such an offense should be replaced with fines if a person committed it out of hooliganism, and any punishment should be canceled if an artist simply wanted to "get a message out" to the public.

Regardless of the band's intentions, it seems they were unprepared for such a strong reaction, and perhaps unaware of the current strain in U.S.-Russian relations in light of Russia's gay propaganda law and U.S. rhetoric about increasing sanctions against Russian officials accused of rights violations.

Contact the author at n.krainova@imedia.ru

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