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How the U.S. Defames Russian Pop Stars

By Michael Bohm

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"America, hands off our beloved singer!"

That was the rallying cry among many Russian politicians, pop stars and outraged Russians after the U.S. Treasury Department announced on Oct. 31 that it had placed Grigory Leps, a popular singer and outspoken supporter of President Vladimir Putin, on its organized-crime black list for alleged ties to a Russian group known as the Brothers' Circle.

This means Leps, rated as the second most influential star in the country by Forbes magazine, is banned from traveling to the U.S. He also won't be able to conduct financial transactions there, and any U.S. assets will be frozen, although he claims to have none. At the same time, however, Leps has not been charged of wrongdoing, and there is no international warrant for his arrest.

After singer
Grigory Leps was
put on a U.S.

government
black list for his
alleged role in a
top organized
crime syndicate,
many Russians
cried
"Russophobia!"
They said
the same thing
when crooner
Iosef Kobzon was
blacklisted as
well.

Bloggers condemned the U.S. decision with posts like "A brazen infringement of Russia's sovereignty!" and "Russophobia!"

Notably, when the Treasury Department included Mexico's Los Zetas drug cartel on the same black list, few in Mexico screamed "Mexicanophobia!" Nor did the Japanese scream "Japanophobia!" when the Yakuza syndicate was put on the list.

The insistence of some Russians that "Russophobia" motivates nearly every U.S. action involving their country speaks volumes of their own phobia of the U.S.

Many Russians used the same Russophobia line when arms dealer Viktor Bout was convicted by a U.S. jury in 2011 for conspiring to kill Americans in Colombia and to sell weapons to a U.S.-designated terrorist group. Is it really possible that 12 jury members approved by the defense — along with the judge who sentenced Bout to 25 years in prison — were all part of a U.S. government conspiracy to discredit Russia?

Russians also said the same thing when Pavel Borodin, then-secretary of the Russia-Belarus Union, was arrested in New York in January 2001 on Swiss money-laundering charges. Three month later, the U.S. extradited Borodin to Switzerland, where he was found guilty and fined 300,000 Swiss francs ($330,000). Despite the guilty verdict, Borodin returned to Russia, where he retained his post as secretary until 2011.

By convicting Borodin, does this mean that the Swiss are also Russophobes, or did they simply join in the U.S. conspiracy against Russia?

Legendary crooner Iosif Kobzon, who has been repeatedly denied a U.S. visa since 1995 for alleged ties to organized crime, offered an original explanation for why Leps ended up on the Treasury Department black list: "It's a set-up — 100 percent," he said. "Some scum bag who emigrated [from Russia to the U.S.] wrote a false denunciation of Leps."

Kobzon and other Russian public figures were at a loss: "Since when is having a few friends alleged to be members of the mafia a crime?" they asked.

If they only knew how much conclusive criminal evidence is required to convince Treasury Department officials to include someone on their black list. The standard of proof used by the department's Office of Foreign Assets Control is extremely high, and only 28 members are currently on the black list for organized crime in the former Soviet Union. Even Kobzon never made it on the Treasury list. He only made in onto the State Department list, which has a much lower standard of only denying visas without financial sanctions.

Russian authorities have asked the Treasury Department for its evidence pointing to Leps' purported role in international organized crime. They have a right to view this material, and U.S. authorities should fulfill the request quickly. After all, the U.S. and Russia are partners in combatting transnational organized crime.

But it's doubtful that the Russian authorities would take a fair look at the U.S. files and investigate the dozen Russian citizens, including Leps, on the list of purported Brothers' Circle members. After all, there is a strong sense of solidarity among the Russian elite that adhere to the Omerta-like code of "We don't surrender our own!" — particularly when it involves prominent people like Leps, who was a member of Putin's "trusted delegates" during his 2012 presidential campaign and who performed at several pro-Putin rallies.

This is why there are so few black lists in Russia. After all, if Russia had issued its own Sergei Magnitsky or Brothers' Circle black lists and investigated the defendants on these lists thoroughly, perhaps the U.S. wouldn't have needed to do this work for the Kremlin.

Kobzon not only blamed "Russophobic" U.S. authorities for putting him and Leps on their black lists. He also accused the Kremlin of being "weak" in facing down the U.S. for its "defamation campaign" against Russia.

Perhaps, in answer to Kobzon's complaint, the Kremlin could show its "strength" in the same way as it did after U.S. President Barack Obama signed the Magnitsky Act, which applied sanctions against Russian officials linked to human rights abuses. In its "asymmetric measure," the State Duma passed the "anti-Magnitsky law," which levied sanctions against U.S. officials — such as John Yoo, legal adviser to former President George W. Bush — for alleged human rights abuses. To add a little more asymmetry, the law also banned all U.S. adoptions of Russian children.

In this spirit, the Duma could pass a law allowing Russia to sanction a U.S. pop star for every Russian one sanctioned by the U.S. The Russians could start with Madonna. Although she is not known to have any mafia ties, she was accused of violating the St. Petersburg "gay propaganda" law when she urged equal rights for LGBT members during her August 2012 concert in the city. In addition, the Duma could add U.S. rock group Bloodhound Gang to the list after a band member stuck the Russian flag down his pants in an onstage stunt in Odessa in August.

The sanctions would give the Kremlin the opportunity to deliver a strong, revengeful blow to the U.S. — just like it did with its anti-Magnitsky Act, which proved popular among most Russians. Granted, the "crimes" committed by Madonna and Bloodhound Gang are a far cry from those of a global organized-crime syndicate dealing in drug trafficking. But, then again, that is what has always made the Kremlin's counter-measures against the U.S. so asymmetrical.

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