The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Freed Arms Dealer Viktor Bout Joins Russia's Ultra-Nationalist LDPR

December 12, 2022



Late LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky eyes Viktor Bout. **Sergei Karpukhin / TASS**

Viktor Bout, the arms dealer once dubbed the "Merchant of Death" who was released from a U.S. jail in exchange for U.S. basketball star Brittney Griner last week, has joined Russia's ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), according to video footage posted on the party's Telegram channel on Monday.

In his first public appearance since arriving back in Russia on Thursday, Bout was seen receiving his LDPR membership card from party leader Leonid Slutsky and thanking him for his help in securing his release.

"We are the party of patriots! I am sure that Viktor Bout — a strong-willed and courageous person — will take a worthy place in it. Welcome to our ranks!" Slutsky said.

On Saturday, Bout used his first interview since arriving back in Russia to praise Russian President Vladimir Putin and to offer his backing for Moscow's military offensive in Ukraine, saying that he would have volunteered to go to the front himself if he had the "opportunity

and necessary skills."

Bout was arrested in a U.S. sting operation in Thailand in 2008 after being accused of arming rebels in some of the world's bloodiest conflicts. He was subsequently extradited to the U.S. and sentenced to 25 years in prison in 2012.

While the LDPR is currently the third largest party in the State Duma having taken 7.5% of the vote in Russia's 2021 parliamentary elections, the party has been struggling to remain relevant since the death of its founder and veteran leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky earlier this year.

Bout's invitation to join the party's ranks appears to be another LDPR overture to a high-profile supporter of the war in Ukraine. Last week the party invited business magnate and Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin to join the party, only to be publicly rebuffed and told by Progozhin that he "does not respect" the party's new leader.

Slutsky, who was appointed LDPR leader in May after Zhirinovsky's death, was accused of sexual harassment by three journalists in 2018, leading to a short-lived media boycott of parliament. Slutsky denied the allegations.

However, Bout's political prospects — should they exist — are distinctly dubious, according to Abbas Gallyamov, a former speechwriter for Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“What prospects can a loser have, especially in Russia, a country obsessed with success? What is Bout famous for? The fact that he traded weapons, blabbed too much to American agents, ended up in prison and waited there until his accomplices swapped him,” Gallyamov wrote on his Telegram channel.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/12/12/freed-arms-dealer-viktor-bout-joins-russias-ultra-nationalist-ldpr-a79673