

Fighting the 'Mafia State'

By [Alexei Bayer](#)

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Russian businessman Alexei Kozlov was arrested and sentenced to eight years after falling out with his business partner, former Federation Council Senator Vladimir Slutsker. The villains in this case, alleges Kozlov's wife, Olga Romanova, were prosecutors who were paid to trump up charges.

Romanova, an energetic and resourceful television reporter, was able to get her husband's conviction overturned. In the process, she formed a human rights organization, Russia Behind Bars (rus-sidyashaya.org), to defend others railroaded by crooked law enforcement officials and combat abuses in the penal system. Russia Behind Bars has also become a resource to publicize miscarriages of justice and for mothers, wives and children of convicts simply to state their case, often for the first time.

What emerges from information gathered by Russia Behind Bars is that circumstances that landed Kozlov in jail were far from unique. Falling afoul of a business partner, crossing a competitor, refusing to sell a business, or not paying a bribe can get one prosecuted for tax evasion, money laundering and other crimes. The use of the law enforcement arm of the

"mafia state" to resolve business disputes has become routine. The justice system simply sells itself to the highest bidder.

But Russia is no longer isolated behind the Iron Curtain. Slowly but surely, it is integrating into the global economy. Rich Russians own property abroad, and many invest in foreign companies, such as Facebook. Russia-based companies are listed on major bourses, with Evraz and Polymetal, for instance, poised to join the FTSE 100 stock market index in London. Russia's criminalized business culture is transcending the country's borders.

Groups like the one founded by Romanova may be important in publicizing criminality and corruption within the country's law enforcement system. Their rise is also indicative of the growth of civil society in the country, which has been very much on display in the current wave of street protests against the State Duma elections, especially the huge rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad on Saturday. But ultimately they are powerless to change anything on their own. The most outrageous cases of misuse of the criminal justice system goes unpunished even when they become widely known inside Russia. Domestic publicity is no deterrent whatsoever for shady businessman or corrupt police officials and prosecutors.

But it doesn't mean that they fear nothing. Even though they thrive on corruption and have little difficulty turning the crooked system to their advantage, they don't find it appealing. In fact, they are just as disgusted by it as the next man. Most rich Russians in the private sector and government keep their money offshore, obtain residency permits in the West, and send their children to study and live abroad. While shrugging off bad publicity at home, they value their ability to travel outside Russia. The assets they have squirreled away in foreign banks and property are their true wealth.

This is why the Magnitsky List, which denies visas to officials implicated in the prison death of Hermitage Fund lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, is a real threat to Russia's elites, especially if it is expanded to other suspected malefactors. And this is why international human rights organizations, working jointly with groups such as Russia Behind Bars, should relentlessly pursue corrupt Russian businesspeople and bureaucrats in international courts. They may not win many cases, but it will give those villains the taste of their own medicine. At least it will make corrupt law enforcement officials think twice before they prey on innocent businesspeople and competitors.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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