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## Russia's fury is proof the sanctions are working



*Businessman Bill Browder has convinced the Canadian government to pass a Magnitsky bill applying sanctions on some Kremlin tax officials and police. (LEON NEAL/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images)*

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

In yet another display of spitting fury, the Russian state this week put Bill Browder on the Interpol list, an international register of “most wanted” criminals. This was the fifth time Russia had issued [an international arrest warrant](#) for Browder, a businessman who once worked in the country. Warily, Interpol lifted the warrant on Thursday. But the gesture once again confirmed something few have yet acknowledged: The sanctions on Russia are working.

Browder's real "crime"? He persuaded another government, this time the [Canadians](#), to pass a "[Magnitsky Act](#)," a bill applying sanctions on Russian tax officials and police involved in a vast scam, one that involved changing the names of companies, hijacking their bank accounts and using them to steal money from the Russian state. Browder's lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, discovered the scam. He was investigated and imprisoned, beaten and deprived of medical care until he died. Ever since, Browder has crusaded to punish those responsible by depriving them of access to Western banks, Western vacation homes and Western educations for their children.

As [I've argued before](#), the Russian government really, really hates the Magnitsky sanctions, and it hates them with disproportionate fury. Recently, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, jeered at Browder [during a news conference](#). The [Russian lawyer who met](#) with Jared Kushner, Paul Manafort and Donald Trump Jr. in June 2016 — the one whose fixer dangled the tantalizing offer of "official documents and information that would incriminate" Hillary Clinton — was seeking to have the Magnitsky sanctions lifted, too.

The Magnitsky sanctions also set the template the Obama administration followed in 2014, when, following the invasion of Ukraine, it imposed sanctions not on "Russia," or on "Russians," or even on broad Russian economic sectors, but on particular Russian businessmen and officials known to be closely connected to Putin or directly responsible for his policy in Ukraine. At the time, [I argued](#) that our sanctions on Russia were too little and had come too late. For a decade, the West turned a blind eye to Russian corruption and money-laundering in Europe and the United States, as well as to growing Russian attempts to manipulate politics. Sanctions placed on a few businessmen and politicians, designed to prevent them from using their American credit cards — how could that stop the tidal wave?

But they did. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was indeed curtailed, both by the sanctions and by the Ukrainian army. A Russian plan to divide Ukraine and create a Russian-speaking state in the east ("[Novorossiya](#)") never came to fruition. The war goes on, but at least it is confined to the far eastern corner of the country. Instead of Novorossiya, the Russian invasion created an unattractive mini-state, a tiny thugocracy (the "[Donetsk People's Republic](#)") that is not going to attract imitators. Russian attempts to overturn the sanctions — to persuade Europeans to squabble among themselves and drop them — have so far failed. Even the Russian plan to get Donald Trump elected so that he could lift sanctions has backfired, at least for the moment: [Russian participation in the U.S. election](#) has so constrained the Trump administration that it has found it difficult to have any kind of Russia policy at all.

Inside Russia, the sanctions have created a good deal of elite anger, some directed at Europe, the United States and Browder, but some directed, quietly, at Putin himself. Even Russian businessmen not immediately affected by the sanctions say they are far more constrained now in what they can do — and they know whom to blame. The [Canadian decision on Magnitsky sanctions](#) will add to the conviction that this won't end soon. The gloom is building, adding to a broader sense that Putin's Ukraine policy was a mistake and has to be amended. And this, of course, was the point of the sanctions in the first place.

I still think we need a more profound change in our policy toward Russia, one that focuses far more broadly on protecting U.S. and European politics and business from Russian corruption and

manipulation, and indeed from corruption and manipulation coming from other authoritarian states. But it's a mistake to imagine that sanctions have no impact. It was foolish for the State Department, in an amateurish attempt at consolidation, to [shut down its office on sanctions](#). This is a sophisticated policy tool, it has its place, and it's having an effect. Russia's spitting fury is the proof.

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