



RUSSIA

The Soviet Sinatra: Iosif Kobzon, Famed Russian Singer Turned Lawmaker, Dies Aged 80

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By RFE/RL

Renowned Russian crooner Iosif Kobzon, a Soviet-era icon and a Kremlin-loyal lawmaker sanctioned in the West over Moscow's interference in Ukraine, has died at the age of 80, Russia's news agencies report.

An aide to Kobzon's wife confirmed the death of the singer, the TASS and Interfax news agencies reported on August 30, without indicating the immediate cause of death.

Kobzon, who was known to have suffered from cancer, was reported last month to have been hospitalized in serious condition.

At the time of his death, he served as a deputy with the ruling United Russian party in parliament.

Kobzon became a hugely popular singer during the Soviet era with his performances of patriotic ballads. His image was often likened to that of Frank Sinatra.

WATCH: Vintage Kobzon

He later went into politics and had served in the lower house of Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma, since 1997.

A strong supporter of President Vladimir Putin, Kobzon was also a vocal proponent of Moscow's 2014 seizure of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, which prompted the United States, the European Union, and other countries to hit Russia with sanctions.

Kobzon was among several Russian individuals slapped with sanctions in 2015 by the EU, which accused him of "undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Ukraine."

He had also been linked in Russian media reports with the criminal underworld, reports that he vehemently denied. In 1995, he had his U.S. visa revoked due to alleged criminal ties.

Kobzon tried again to travel to the United States for a tour in 2012 but was denied a U.S. visa due to alleged ties to criminal activity and drug trafficking, according to the company that was trying to organize the tour.

Kobzon was born September 11, 1937, into a Jewish family in the town of Chasiv Yar in what was then Soviet Ukraine. He became interested in singing as a child, and he said that he performed at a children's concert attended by Soviet dictator Josef Stalin in 1946.

While serving in the army, he performed as part of a song-and-dance ensemble with a Soviet military district in the Caucasus, and he later studied voice at the prestigious Gnessin academy in Moscow before becoming one of the Soviet Union's most famous singers.

Putin in June presented Kobzon with a medal of distinction, calling him a "true legend whom we all sincerely love."

Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said on August 30 that the Russian president "is grieving" following Kobzon's death.

"The president has sent a telegram in which he expresses deep, sincere condolences to the relatives and loved ones of the singer," Peskov said.

Prominent Russian artists and politicians also praised Kobzon.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin on Twitter called Kobzon the "main voice of the country and several generations.

With reporting by Interfax, TASS, RFE/RL's Russian Service, Current Time TV, and The Moscow Times