

US politics & policy

US enforcement unit ended by Donald Trump wins right to auction Russian yacht

Russian yacht

Sale of the \$300mn Amadea is expected to move forward but cases that were not charged yet are likely to be abandoned



The Amadea, a 348-foot vessel with a helipad, a lobster tank and a swimming pool, was seized by authorities in Fiji in May 2022
© AP

Stefania Palma in Washington

Published 4 HOURS AGO

Unlock the White House Watch newsletter for free

Your guide to what the 2024 US election means for Washington and the world

Enter your email address

Sign up

US prosecutors have won the right to auction a \$300mn Russian-owned superyacht, but Donald Trump's new attorney-general has dissolved the unit targeting illicit Russian assets and raised questions about the direction of future efforts.

The [US Department of Justice](#) is expected to move forward with the sale of the Amadea, a move that would raise the single-largest sum from its now-defunct KleptoCapture task force, ending years of high maintenance costs shouldered by the government while the vessel has been in custody.

But cases that were under investigation by the unit and not yet charged are likely to be abandoned or de-prioritised unless deemed particularly important, according to a former prosecutor who worked on the initiative. And there is a lower likelihood of transferring proceeds to support Kyiv, which was part of the programme's original goal but has yielded less than \$6mn as of last year.

Meanwhile, enforcement efforts are expected to move away from oligarchs and asset seizure to emphasise an emerging focus on export controls around sensitive technology.

The DoJ might continue to pursue cases where there is a chance to sell seized assets with high maintenance costs, experts said.

"It's unusual to drop a case, all the more so with a case you've won," said Andrew Adams, a partner at Steptoe and the task force's former director.

Trump-appointed US attorney-general Pam Bondi last month dissolved KleptoCapture, diverting resources to fight drug cartels and transnational criminal organisations. The unit was launched by the Biden administration mere days after Moscow's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in a bid to enforce sanctions and "hold accountable corrupt [Russian](#) oligarchs".

The move comes as Trump has clashed with Kyiv over US military aid and has adopted a friendlier stance towards Moscow. But on Friday, the US and its G7 partners warned Russia they could expand sanctions, as Trump seeks to win over Russian President Vladimir Putin to his ceasefire proposal.

Authorities seized the Amadea, a 348-foot vessel with a helipad, a lobster tank and a swimming pool, in Fiji in May 2022. It was towed to San Diego, where it remained as of Friday, according to MarineTraffic.

Prosecutors alleged the yacht was the property of Suleiman Kerimov, a Russian gold magnate with Kremlin ties under sanctions, and was subject to seizure because of potential violation of US money laundering laws and other statutes. Kerimov denied ownership and a former chief executive of Russian oil company Rosneft, Eduard Khudainatov, claimed to be the true owner in court filings.

Judge Dale Ho of Manhattan federal court concluded that Khudainatov was a "mere straw" owner and allowed the auction to proceed in rulings issued on Monday and Tuesday. Adam Ford, a lawyer representing Khudainatov, said the ruling was "legally and factually flawed" and said he would appeal against it, challenging "any illegitimate sale or transfer through international legal channels".

The DoJ declined to comment.

Beyond asset seizures, KleptoCapture cracked down on the illicit export of sensitive US technology that could be used to develop nuclear and hypersonic weapons, quantum computing or other military instruments.

On his first day back in the White House, Trump in January issued an executive order that called for an assessment on "how to identify and eliminate loopholes in existing export controls".

Commerce secretary Howard Lutnick during his confirmation hearing echoed this focus, saying: “We’ve got to find a way to back our export controls with tariff models.” The Disruptive Technology Strike Force, a joint DoJ and commerce department effort aimed at thwarting foreign adversaries illegally acquiring sensitive US tech, remains in place.

The enforcement focus on counter-proliferation was “going to continue, if not increase”, said Artie McConnell, partner at BakerHostetler and a former prosecutor working on KleptoCapture cases. “There is a broad bipartisan consensus that regardless of what happens in Ukraine, we don’t want our stuff showing up in wars being used by our adversaries.”

“We don’t want the Russians to widen the gap in hypersonics. We don’t want the Chinese to develop the first quantum computer,” he added. “There’s a broader global security impetus to all of this.”

While the luxury boats, jets and apartments at the heart of these cases captivate the public, experts argue that revealing the alleged web of shell companies and co-conspirators that facilitate illegal transactions across the globe to benefit Russian magnates under sanctions is the task force’s true success.

“A goal of KleptoCapture was to disrupt the network of concealed ownership structures, illicit money transfers, and facilitators,” said Joshua Naftalis, a partner at Pallas and former DoJ lawyer who worked on KleptoCapture cases. “All the people and entities that made it possible were really the point as well.”

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

US politics & policy

War in Ukraine

US foreign policy

US Department of Justice

US Government