

U.S. Warned Against Magnitsky Sanctions

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The Foreign Ministry has warned U.S. legislators against passing a law that would punish Russians linked to the death of Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, saying it would undermine cooperation.

A bill introduced in Congress on Wednesday would bar 60 Russians from the United States and its financial markets, sanctions that would be lifted only after those responsible for Magnitsky's jail death were brought to justice.

Magnitsky, a 37-year-old lawyer for what was once Russia's top equity fund, died in November 2009 after a year in Moscow jails.

Colleagues and human rights activists say he was denied adequate medical treatment and subjected to conditions amounting to torture in a plot led by the same law enforcement officials he had accused of committing a multimillion-dollar tax fraud.

The Foreign Ministry said the legislation "dissonates with the current level of interaction

between our countries, evoking associations with the Cold War era."

In a statement, the ministry said the bill was a bid to turn the tragedy of Magnitsky's death into a "political show."

"Such games by American legislators will certainly not aid the search for the truth, and will introduce a serious irritant into our relations," it said.

It warned that the legislation would undermine cooperation between U.S. and Russian law enforcement "in such important areas as the fights against international organized crime, terrorism, drug trafficking and other modern-day threats."

Former colleagues of Magnitsky have called his death a test of President Dmitry Medvedev's commitment to his stated goals of curbing corruption and reforming the justice system, from police and prosecutors to prisons and courts.

Medvedev fired several prison officials after Magnitsky's death and urged the authorities to examine the circumstances, but nobody has faced charges and few of the 60 Russians named in the legislation have faced any consequences.

U.S. Senator James Cardin, a Democrat and co-sponsor of the bill, who also chairs the U.S. Helsinki Commission, an independent federal agency that monitors human rights, said Wednesday that "the leading figures in this scheme remain in power in Russia."

In April, Cardin urged U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to bar the 60 Russians from the United States. The bill faces a steep climb to get passed before Congress completes its work for the year.

Republican Senator John McCain said Friday that he also was a co-sponsor of the bill. "Sergei Magnitsky was an ordinary man, but through his extraordinary courage and love for his country, he exposed the cruelest and most corrupt aspects of the Russian government today," he said in a statement distributed by Magnitsky's supporters.

U.S. President Barack Obama has launched a "reset" of long-strained Russia ties, and his critics say noticeable improvements have come at the expense of pressure on the Kremlin over human rights and freedoms. The White House denies that.

(Reuters, MT)

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