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Magnitsky Backers Hit for Defamation

By Alexandra Taranova

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Artyom Kuznetsov

U.S. lawyer Jamison Firestone, Hermitage Capital head William Browder and Russian opposition activists face possible charges after police opened a defamation investigation at the request of the senior Interior Minister investigator implicated in the prison death of Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky.

Moscow police opened the inquiry on Aug. 8, days after the investigator, Lieutenant-Colonel Artyom Kuznetsov, filed a complaint with the Fili-Davydkovo police precinct, Gazeta.ru reported Friday, citing precinct officials.

No individuals are identified in the police investigation, but Kuznetsov singled out several parties in his complaint, including Russian-untouchables.com, a web site set up by Magnitsky's supporters that features documents and video footage accusing Kuznetsov's family of spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on new apartments and expensive cars after 2007 — money that the web site said Kuznetsov and his family could not afford on their official incomes.

Kuznetsov also complained in an interview published Friday that opposition activists with The Other Russia group glued posters with Magnitsky's portrait and the words, "Kuznetsov Is a Killer," in the apartment building where he lives with his wife and young child.

Kuznetsov said he believed that Browder, a U.S.-British businessman who has been barred from Russia for murky national security reasons since 2005, was behind the allegations against him.

"For me, it is clear that Hermitage head William Browder is standing behind the smear campaign," Kuznetsov told Kommersant. "His goal is clear: He fears to answer for his actions, even in Britain."

Browder and other Magnitsky supporters accuse Kuznetsov of arresting Magnitsky and neglecting his subsequent health problems as revenge for his allegations that Kuznetsov and other officials had defrauded the government of $230 million. Magnitsky made the accusations after the officials opened a tax evasion case against Hermitage Capital, which has denied wrongdoing.

Magnitsky, 37, died from heart failure in a Moscow detention center in November 2009.

Hermitage Capital on Friday accused Kuznetsov and his colleagues of initiating the defamation investigation to make sure that they would not be punished for their own misdeeds, Vedomosti reported.

Firestone, who was Magnitsky's boss, wrote on his blog Friday that Kuznetsov's complaint was a brazen attempt to portray himself as a victim of his own crime.

President Dmitry Medvedev fired about 20 law enforcement officials in the wake of Magnitsky's death and ordered a thorough investigation. But nearly a year later, no arrests have been made in connection with the death.

A bill was introduced into U.S. Congress late last month that would bar 60 Russians implicated in Magnitsky's death from the United States and its financial markets. The Foreign Ministry has warned U.S. lawmakers against approving the bill, saying it would harm relations.

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