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In Tit-for-Tat, Russia Wants to Blacklist Foreigners

By Alexandra Odynova

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With the United States considering sanctions on Russian officials implicated in the prison death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, the Foreign Ministry has turned to the State Duma with a blacklist of its own.

But instead of punishing other countries for human rights abuses against their own citizens, the ministry would blacklist foreigners deemed to have violated the rights of Russian citizens.

Under a bill submitted to the Duma on Tuesday, blacklisted foreigners would be barred from entering Russia, while their assets in Russian banks would be frozen and they would be banned from conducting business deals in Russia.

"This is our acceptable answer to the actions of the West, including the U.S. State Department, which drafts certain blacklists of Russia citizens," said Igor Lebedev, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party's faction in the Duma, Interfax reported.

A United Russia deputy, Dmitry Vyatkin, said the sanctions bill, if passed, "won't be implied frequently but only in particularly outrageous cases," according to a statement on his party's web site.

A Just Russia leader Nikolai Levichyev seemed to acknowledge that the likelihood of foreign officials owning any assets that could be seized in Russia were slim, saying the impact of the sanctions would mostly be "psychological," Interfax said.

The bill carries signatures of support from lawmakers in all four Duma factions. But the Communist Party said later that its deputy, Oleg Denisenko, had expressed his personal view and the party wanted the language in the bill to be expanded to include penalties on people from other former Soviet republics as well, particularly Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko.

The Foreign Ministry has warned Belarus over the detention of Russian citizens, including journalists, during unrest connected to the country's December presidential election.

The bill now only refers to cases in the United States that have long been a source of irritation to Russia, including the arrest of businessman Viktor Bout in an arms smuggling investigation and pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko on drug smuggling charges. In addition, the bill mentions a 1998 car accident in Vladivostok in which the U.S. consul general's car struck and paralyzed Alexander Kashin.

Kashin, who wants $9 million in compensation, has rejected a U.S. offer of $100,000 as too low, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told the Duma in May 2010 that he has raised the case at every meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her predecessor, Condoleezza Rice.

"Our patience is running out," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said at a Monday meeting with Duma deputies, RIA-Novosti reported.

"The matter is not about the charges but the manner in which those cases are conducted," he said, without elaborating.

It was not clear when the bill might come up for a first reading in the Duma, which adjourns for its summer recess in mid-July.

Opposition leader Boris Nemtsov said he believed the bill was the brainchild of Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin's first deputy chief of staff, and drafted in response to a bill introduced by U.S. Senator Ben Cardin to Congress last month. The bill, supported by 18 senators from both the Democratic and Republican parties, would impose visa restrictions and freeze the U.S. assets of 60 Russian officials linked to the prosecution of Magnitsky, who was jailed in a tax fraud case that his supporters say was fabricated by corrupt officials.

Its latest version also targets individuals "responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of human rights," without listing specific names.

"Surkov is doing his best to stop Cardin's bill," Nemtsov said by telephone Wednesday.

Nemtsov suggested that Surkov, known as the Kremlin's chief ideologist, was concerned

because his name might be included on the blacklist. Surkov is not among the 60 officials named in the bill.

Several calls to Surkov's office went unanswered Wednesday afternoon.

The New Times magazine reported earlier this month that Surkov lobbied against that bill during a trip to Washington on June 6.

Details on how a foreigner might be included on Russia's blacklist have not been released.

Konstantin Kosachyov, chairman of the Duma's International Affairs Committee, said the bill would allow deputies, Federation Council senators, ombudsmen and Public Chamber members to ask the government to impose sanctions on foreign officials who acted against Russians abroad.

Magnitsky's former employer, Jamison Firestone, said it would be hard for Russia to rationalize any sanctions.

"It's clear that the Duma has no interest in protecting Russian citizens from their own corrupt officials," Firestone said in an e-mailed statement. "This proposed law is just an attempt to create an international scandal to stop the adoption of the U.S. law."

Firestone pointed out that unlike the Russian bill, the U.S. legislation seeks to ban Russians who use their powers to hurt their own citizens.

If passed by the Duma and the Federation Council, the bill would go to Dmitry Medvedev, who has been busy resetting ties with Washington during his presidency. Whether he would sign the bill depends largely on public reaction, said Alexei Makarkin, a political analyst with the Center for Political Technologies. "If there is a loud public outcry, Medvedev won't sign it," he said.

Makarkin said the more important issue is how the legislation, if passed, would be applied, warning that it might be used as a tool to hinder foreign investors in Russia.

The Kremlin's human rights council will present its final report on the death of Magnitsky to Medvedev next Tuesday, news reports said Wednesday. Committee members earlier concluded that Magnitsky died as result of negligence or the deliberate actions of investigators, judges and prison doctors.

Medvedev has ordered an investigation into the 2009 death, but no one has been charged with wrongdoing. Several investigators have been promoted and awarded medals.

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