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Dark Clouds Gather Over U.S. Reset

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Medvedev, pictured decorating LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky with the Order for Services to the Fatherland on Thursday, has ordered a blacklist. **Denis Sinyakov**

Dark storm clouds are collecting over the much-heralded "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations, with both sides working to blacklist the other's officials, new tensions over U.S. missile defense plans, and a leaked CIA paper supposedly blaming Russia for a bomb blast near the U.S. Embassy in Georgia.

But analysts said it was too early to write off the reset, and that much of this week's disquiet had more to do with both countries' domestic politics than a sharp change in relations.

"The reset will continue, but with irritations, even if the Republicans return to power," said Alexei Malashenko, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

This week's cacophony started Tuesday when U.S. media reported that the U.S. State Department had put a number of Russian officials on a visa blacklist who are thought to be linked to the prison death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky.

The reports were later confirmed, prompting the Foreign Ministry to announce late Wednesday that Moscow would retaliate to such "hostile steps."

A Kremlin spokeswoman said by telephone Thursday that President Dmitry Medvedev has ordered the Foreign Ministry to prepare measures against U.S. citizens to counter a travel ban against the Russians officials.

The spokeswoman declined further comment but confirmed a statement made by Medvedev's spokeswoman Natalya Timakova to Kommersant, which reported the president's orders Thursday.

Timakova denounced the U.S. blacklist as a step that went beyond the worst days of the Cold War. "We are bewildered by the State Department's position," she said. "No such measures were taken even in the deepest Cold War years."

Medvedev's response might be all the more frustrating for U.S. President Barack Obama because the State Department's authorization of the blacklist was actually a desperate attempt to save the reset with Moscow, which he considers a hallmark of his presidency. His administration had hoped that the blacklist would convince U.S. senators to abandon a bill that foresees much more sweeping sanctions like asset freezes against a broader number of people.

Obama's administration makes it clear in its comments to the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act, better known as the Cardin bill after its main sponsor, Democrat Senator Benjamin Cardin, that it wants the legislation abandoned because it, among other things, could cause the Kremlin to make good on a threat to cancel cooperation on issues like Iran and Afghanistan.

But the furious response from the Kremlin, the Foreign Ministry and numerous State Duma deputies seems to point another way.

"Moscow has not appreciated Washington's generosity," Kommersant wrote Thursday.

Duma deputies already are preparing a bill that would introduce similar sanctions on foreigners deemed to have violated the rights of Russian citizens.

Mikhail Fedotov, chairman of Medvedev's human rights council, criticized the conflict Thursday, saying it was foolish to deny entry in a tit-for-tat manner.

Fedotov said Russian officials should worry less about the U.S. blacklist than about a list that his council is compiling as part of an independent investigation ordered by Medvedev into Magnitsky's death. "Our list is much more fearsome. It does not close the road to America but opens the road to the Butyrskaya prison," he told reporters in comments carried by Interfax.

In a new uncomfortable development, Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's representative to NATO, complained Thursday that influential U.S. lawmakers are opposed to cooperating with Moscow on NATO's planned missile shield in Europe.

"They're practically not hiding the fact that the system will be directed against Russia, not

against some mythical state in the Middle East," Rogozin said after returning to Brussels from talks in Washington, Interfax reported.

Rogozin said an opportunity remained for joint cooperation, touted by NATO officials as a key element in the Western alliance's future strategy, but it all depends on the political will in Washington.

He also warned that if Obama is not re-elected next year and "Russophobes" come to power, this might "destroy the global political stability that has been built with so much effort over the last decade."

Rogozin was bristling after meetings with Senators Jon Kyl and Mark Kirk, both staunchly conservative Republicans.

Kyl, the Senate's Republican whip, also made Russia-related headlines this week when he was called for a congressional investigation into reports that Russian military intelligence officers were behind a bomb blast next to the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi last September.

Kyl's comments appeared in a Washington Times report Wednesday that says a highly classified report drafted by the CIA but with input from other U.S. agencies has concluded that the General Staff's intelligence directorate, or GRU, is to blame for the explosion.

No one was hurt in the minor blast outside an embassy wall, but Georgian police later arrested six people whom they accused of being Russian agents responsible for staging a series of explosions, including the one outside the U.S. mission.

Last month, a Tbilisi court found 15 people guilty of terrorism and sentenced them to lengthy prison terms. The court sentenced the suspected ringleader, Russian Army Major Yevgeny Borisov, to 30 years in prison in absentia.

The Georgian Interior Ministry accuses Borisov of working as a GRU officer in Abkhazia and has put him on an Interpol wanted list.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has denied the allegations. It also says Borisov has not been in Abkhazia since August 2010 and could not have been involved in the explosions, which occurred last fall.

The case has attracted little international attention, partly because Tbilisi, which has poor relations with Moscow, has accused the GRU of spying in a number of cases in recent months.

As evidence of the CIA report, The Washington Times report quotes two unidentified U.S. officials whom it says have read it.

Andrei Soldatov, who tracks the Russian intelligence community with the Agentura.ru think tank, said the GRU has in the past acted "autonomously" in Georgia but he has not seen enough evidence to support its involvement in the blasts.

About the Washington Times story, he said: "This report unfortunately does not give us any first-hand information."

Malashenko, of the Carnegie Center, said that many of this week's turbulence in U.S.-Russian ties is linked to domestic policy. Washington is boiling over the failure of Congress and the White House to reach an agreement to avoid a possible default on the country's debt, while the elite in Moscow is on tenterhooks over the failure of Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to provide clarity on whether either will run in the 2012 presidential election.

Wednesday saw the publication of two much-discussed articles: Influential analysts Igor Yurgens and Yevgeny Gontmakher urged Medvedev to run in Vedomosti, while Reuters quoted "senior political sources" as saying Putin was likely to return to the presidency.

"Medvedev is in an extremely difficult position, and he must publicly protect those officials, even if they are his enemies," Malashenko said.

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