

Diplomat Downplays U.S. Ban

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U.S. visa restrictions on Russian officials linked to the death of investment fund lawyer Sergei Magnitsky will not affect cooperation on Iran and Afghanistan, a senior diplomat said.

“Speaking about the information in the U.S. media about an asymmetrical response, a cutback in cooperation over Afghanistan, Iran, the Middle East, then there is nothing more far from reality than such speculations,” Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Tuesday.

The 2009 death of the 37-year-old, who worked for equity fund Hermitage Capital and died after a year in Moscow jails, spooked investors and tarnished Russia’s image.

The Kremlin’s human rights council has said he was probably beaten to death.

The United States imposed visa restrictions on some Russian officials believed to be involved in Magnitsky’s death.

Russia reacted angrily, prompting concerns that the move could affect the “reset” policy between the two Cold War foes.

“We are working to respond symmetrically,” Ryabkov said in comments carried by Russian news agencies.

The friction over the case comes as the U.S. Senate advances a proposed Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act that would require the State Department to freeze the officials’ U.S. assets.

U.S. President Barack Obama’s administration has drafted a memo opposing the legislation, saying it had already taken similar action under existing law, according to a copy of the document obtained by The Cable blog at Foreign Policy magazine and posted on the Internet.

The memo also says Russian officials have warned that passage of the Senate measure would have an impact on its cooperation with the United States on issues of international concern, including transit to Afghanistan. A key route for supplying troops in Afghanistan goes across Russia.

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