

How to Get Autocrats to Bend

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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U.S. Representative Jim McGovern introduced an expanded Magnitsky act to Congress last week. The focus of the bill goes beyond the original legislation sponsored by Senator Ben Cardin, which targeted 60 Russian officials implicated in the 2009 death of Sergei Magnitsky in pretrial detention. McGovern's bill contains an additional open clause that expands the same type of sanctions — visa bans and asset freezes — against Russian officials implicated in other cases involving "gross violations of human rights."

Around the same time that U.S. lawmakers were working to tighten the screws on Russia, the European Union was seeing the results of similar economic sanctions on Belarus. Andrei Sannikov, an opposition presidential candidate in Belarus' December 2010 election, and his campaign manager, Dmitry Bondarenko, were pardoned by President Alexander Lukashenko and released on April 15 after serving 16 months in prison. The two, along with hundreds of others, were arrested for taking part in mass protests against Lukashenko's landslide reelection, which independent monitors say was heavily rigged.

Belarussian political analysts and Sannikov himself believe that the dominant factor behind

the pardons were EU economic and political sanctions levied against the Lukashenko regime in March.

To be sure, the measures are only the beginning of the battle against widespread human rights abuses in Belarus. EU and U.S. officials should press Belarussian authorities to free the hundreds of other opposition activists who are still behind bars on trumped-up charges. But the role that EU sanctions played in freeing two prominent political prisoners offers encouragement for those who support the Magnitsky act and who hope that its sanctions will also pressure Russia to improve its human rights record.

Like the EU sanctions against Belarus, which included visa bans and asset freezes on 220 senior Belarussian officials, the Magnitsky act is aimed specifically against officials who are directly or indirectly implicated in human rights abuses. This targeted approach is much more effective than broader sanctions. Take, for example, the 1974 Jackson-Vanik amendment, which was also aimed at pressuring the Kremlin to improve human rights in the Soviet Union — specifically, the universal right to emigrate. Although the amendment helped thousands of Soviet Jews and other religious minorities to emigrate, it also hurt ordinary people because it placed broad trade restrictions on the country.

Critics say the expanded Magnitsky act will have less impact on Russia than the EU sanctions had on Belarus. After all, the argument goes, Belarus' economy is much weaker, and the leadership is much more vulnerable to sanctions. Moreover, Russia, much like China, can afford to thumb its nose at those who complain about human rights abuses because it has the world's largest reserves of mineral and energy resources and the fourth-largest foreign currency reserves.

But unlike Jackson-Vanik and other broad sanctions, the Magnitsky act hits where it hurts the most — the pocket books of corrupt officials. Russia's ambassador to the United States, Sergei Kislyak, repeated the standard Kremlin line this week that the proposed Magnitsky act amounted to unacceptable meddling in the country's internal affairs.

Notably, Lukashenko said the same thing — before he pardoned Sannikov and Bodarenko.

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