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Russian Delegation Visits U.S. to Lobby Against Magnitsky Bill

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Senate Finance Committee chairman Max Baucus, pictured above, has pledged to attach the Magnitsky bill to a decision over extending permanent normal trade relations to Russia.

WASHINGTON — The Russians are coming to Washington; in fact, they are already here. But they aren't happy.

A delegation of Federation Council senators is in the U.S. capital to lobby American lawmakers against a bill sanctioning Russian officials implicated in human rights abuses, a move Moscow considers offensive outside interference in its affairs.

After meetings on Capitol Hill, the four-man Russian delegation did not have a lot of progress to report Wednesday from its lobbying against the Magnitsky bill.

But it had a warning.

"We really don't want the U.S. Congress to adopt this bill, which has the potential to deteriorate U.S.-Russia relations for years or even for decades to come. It will become a real

irritant in U.S.-Russia relations," delegation member Vitaly Malkin said, speaking through an interpreter at the Russian Embassy.

Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer who worked for equity fund Hermitage Capital in Moscow, was jailed in 2008 on charges of tax evasion and fraud.

His colleagues say these were fabricated by police investigators, whom he had accused of stealing $230 million from the state.

The Kremlin's own human rights council says Magnitsky was probably beaten to death in prison in 2009.

A Russian parliamentary investigation into the Magnitsky case is underway, the group said, displaying a dossier with what delegates said were the preliminary findings.

The bill pending in Congress would require the United States to deny visas and freeze the assets of Russians linked to Magnitsky's death as well as those of other human rights abusers in Russia.

The Senate version, sponsored by Ben Cardin, a Democrat, would extend the sanctions to human rights abusers anywhere in the world.

The dossier brought by the Russians says Magnitsky suffered from undetected diseases, which led to his death. It also says his arrest was legal and the result of his involvement in tax evasion schemes.

"We think the lack of adequate medical assistance accelerated his death," Malkin told reporters.

Malkin denounced what he called "baseless allegations" about the case by William Browder, CEO of Hermitage Capital, who has campaigned for passage of the bill.

Browder showed a documentary film to U.S. lawmakers that said Magnitsky's death was tied to organized crime stretching into the Russian government.

But the Magnitsky bill had already gained traction in Congress before Browder's film was released.

The legislation passed House and Senate committees, and it has bipartisan support in both chambers. Its future is still unclear, however, partly because the administration of President Barack Obama has been unenthusiastic about it.

The bill faces another test next week, when the Senate Finance Committee is expected to vote on whether to extend permanent normal trading relations to Russia. The panel's chairman, Senator Max Baucus, has pledged to attach the Magnitsky bill to the trade bill, making a floor vote probable.

The Russian delegation visiting Washington met some of the Magnitsky bill's Senate co-sponsors, Republican Senators John McCain and Roger Wicker, and planned to see the House sponsor, Democratic Representative Jim McGovern, on Thursday.

They saw a State Department official and a National Security Council staffer on Wednesday. But they said they have not been able to set up a meeting with Cardin.

Asked about the delegation's lobbying in Washington, Cardin told reporters Tuesday: "I think that Russia should take care of their own business. They should take care of human rights violators and hold them accountable."

Other lawmakers pointed out that while the government of President Vladimir Putin opposes the Magnitsky bill, opposition activists have called for its passage. Even some Russian businessmen have spoken in favor of it, McGovern said.

"I've talked to Russian businesspeople who think this is a good idea," McGovern said recently. "It's not just human rights activists but a lot of people who would like to see the Russian government clean up its act and crack down on human rights abusers and those involved in corruption."

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