

U.S. Trade Bill Gets Bipartisan Support

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The U.S. Capitol Building, where the Congress sits

WASHINGTON — U.S. business groups, armed with a letter of support from 73 first-term Republicans in the House of Representatives, said Friday that they were redoubling efforts to win approval of a controversial Russian trade bill in coming weeks.

"We are pressing very hard to encourage a resolution by the August recess," said Randi Levinas, executive vice president of the U.S.-Russia Business Council, arguing that U.S. jobs were at stake if the bill is not approved.

"This is not a slam dunk and it's not something that's very easily done. But we are pushing extremely hard to invite the parties to come together and have the discussions that are necessary so we don't face a competitive disadvantage" in the Russian market, said Levinas, who also leads a coalition of about 150 business organizations pushing for the bill.

The groups bolstered their case for action on the legislation with a letter signed by 73 Republicans elected in 2010, in many cases running against the policies of Democratic

President Barack Obama.

"Mr. President, it is our understanding that you support the effort to extend [permanent normal trade relations] to Russia. ... We stand ready to work with you to achieve this goal and invite you to work with us, shoulder to shoulder, at all levels in order to swiftly move the necessary legislation through both houses of Congress," the freshmen lawmakers said.

The push to pass the legislation comes at a low point in U.S.-Russia relations, with many U.S. lawmakers angry over Moscow's support for the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad and questioning Russia's commitment to democracy, human rights and fair trade.

Congress is under pressure to lift a Cold War human rights provision known as the Jackson-Vanik amendment and approve "permanent normal trade relations," or PNTR, because of Russia's expected entry into the World Trade Organization in August.

If it does not act, Russia could deny U.S. firms some of the market-opening concessions it made to join the WTO, putting those companies at a disadvantage to foreign competitors in one of the world's 10 largest economies.

The Finance Committee in the Democratic-led Senate announced plans to vote Wednesday on the PNTR bill, including new measures to address human rights concerns in Russia.

"Increasing our exports to Russia will help create new jobs and give America's economy the shot in the arm it needs," Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus said in a statement. "Russia is joining the WTO no matter what Congress does ... so we need to act soon."

Senator Orrin Hatch, the top Republican on the finance panel, said he had worked with Baucus to toughen the PNTR bill by adding a number of reporting requirements to ensure Russia abides by its WTO commitments.

One of the provisions holds Russia's feet to the fire by requiring the U.S. Trade Representative's Office to report within six months on what it is doing to ensure Moscow honors its obligations and then to file an annual report thereafter.

"America's relationship with Russia is complex, demanding both carrots and sticks to ensure Russia is a reliable international partner. With this legislation, we have achieved that critical balance," Hatch said.

In the Republican-led House, Ways and Means chairman Dave Camp has said he prefers a "clean" bill free of human rights provisions while calling on Obama to work harder to round up bipartisan support for PNTR.

Unlike Baucus, Camp has not scheduled committee action on the legislation, lacking a Democratic co-sponsor for his preferred approach to the bill.

Levinas acknowledged that passing PNTR required "a number of pieces to fall into place before the August recess. But there's still conceivably time to get this done," she said.

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