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European Parliament's Vote on Magnitsky Jars Russians

By The Moscow Times

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Senior lawmakers on Wednesday criticized a resolution by the European Parliament to establish a list of banned Russians similar to one under discussion in the U.S. Congress.

"This is yet another gross attempt to interfere in Russia's internal affairs and [constitutes] bold pressure on our judicial system," said Leonid Slutsky, deputy head of Russia's delegation to the European Parliament and a Liberal Democratic Party member in the State Duma.

"Russia will not leave these attempts unanswered," he told reporters.

Alexei Pushkov, chairman of the Duma's International Affairs Committee and a United Russia member, said the proposal "aims to divide Europe and Russia" and might create a "negative political climate," Ekho Moskvy radio reported.

On Tuesday, the European Parliament overwhelmingly approved the nonbinding resolution,

which recommends entry bans and asset freezes for officials implicated in the 2009 prison death of anti-corruption lawyer Sergei Magnitsky.

The lawmakers, who rejected a similar proposal two years ago, this time included a statement urging the Russian government "to conduct a credible and independent investigation encompassing all aspects of the case" and "to put an end to the widespread corruption and to reform the judicial system."

The resolution also asks EU leaders, during their talks with Russian officials, to bring up Magnitsky and "the issue of intimidation and impunity in cases involving human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers in a more determined, resolute and result-oriented manner."

Kristiina Ojuland, an Estonian lawmaker who co-drafted the resolution, said the measure sought to obtain justice for Magnitsky and to show solidarity with ordinary Russians.

"Instead of facing justice, these people are still in office. They travel in the EU, spend their dirty money in the EU, buy real estate and educate their children here," she said in a statement. "At the same time, this recommendation is our sign of solidarity with the Russian people, who are living through challenging times and aspire to genuine, not decorative, democracy."

Magnitsky, who died after a beating by prison guards, was jailed by investigators whom he had accused of embezzling millions of dollars from the Russian government.

Slutsky called the European Parliament's decision "politicized" and expressed regret that the lawmakers "suddenly became interested in the Magnitsky case 3 1/2 years after his tragic death in jail, exactly when negotiations on visa-free travel between Russia and the EU have reached a high-water mark," Interfax reported.

He stressed that Magnitsky's death has been raised repeatedly by both U.S. and European politicians in recent months.

"Some have pre-election fever, and others are apparently becoming hostages to political lobbying and Cold War remnants," he said.

Slutsky noted that the European resolution is merely a recommendation and that the EU's executive authorities would have the final word.

Although the U.S. Magnitsky List remains under discussion in Congress, the U.S. State Department has denied visas to dozens of Russians implicated in the case since last year. The British government also has enforced a list of banned Russians. Neither country has disclosed the names on their lists.

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