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Kremlin Silent as Magnitsky Bill Heads to House

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The Kremlin remained silent Wednesday after U.S. lawmakers moved to advance a bill to punish Russian officials for human rights violations.

A decision Tuesday by the House Rules Committee will bring the bill, which aroused strong opposition in Moscow, up for a vote by the full House later this week.

The committee decided to combine the human rights legislation, known as the Magnitsky Act, with a bill that would grant Russia permanent normal trade relations, or PNTR.

The full House is expected to vote Thursday on the plan to merge the bills and could consider the combined package Friday, Reuters reported.

Moscow has long campaigned against the Magnitsky bill, warning that it would damage relations between the countries.

The legislation is named for Sergei Magnitsky, a whistle-blowing lawyer who died in jail in

2009 after exposing purported fraud involving government officials.

Leonid Kalashnikov, first deputy chairman of the State Duma's International Affairs Committee, said Wednesday that Moscow would be unable to commensurately respond to the legislation.

The bill directs the administration of President Barack Obama to deny visas to officials involved in the detention, abuse or death of Magnitsky and to freeze any assets they might have in U.S. banks.

The bill also empowers the White House to punish other human rights abusers in Russia and allows certain members of Congress to suggest individuals deserving of sanctions.

It would be pointless to apply similar measures to U.S. officials, Kalashnikov said.

"American officials don't invest money in our country and don't positively strive to come here," he said, Interfax reported.

Lawmakers feel the need to complement PNTR with a punitive measure because they don't understand that normal trade with Russia is, first of all, in America's interests, international affairs expert Fyodor Lukyanov said.

The move requires lawmakers to lift a Cold War-era provision known as the Jackson-Vanik amendment.

The measure, adopted in 1974, restricts trade with Russia because the Soviet government prevented Jews from emigrating, a rights violation that is long gone.

"[Legislators] see a repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment as a gift to Russia [and believe that] such a gift can't be given to Russia for free," Lukyanov said.

He also said binding the two bills into one package is likely a tool to force Obama to sign the Magnitsky bill.

Obama is often accused of being on President Vladimir Putin's "leash," but he will have little choice but to sign the legislation if it's the only way to PNTR with Russia, Lukyanov said.

Obama's administration previously stated that Russia could view the Magnitsky bill as meddling with its internal affairs. The White House also argued the bill is unnecessary because the U.S. government had already imposed visa restrictions on the Russians thought to have been involved in Magnitsky's death.

Lukyanov warned that some U.S. companies could face problems in Russia because of the bill, although the government would never openly admit any link.

It makes sense to link the two bills because both the Jackson-Vanik amendment and the Magnitsky bill deal with human rights, said Valery Borshchyov, a member of the presidential human rights council.

Rachel Denber, deputy director of the Europe and Central Asia division of Human Rights

Watch, said the merger of the bills is intended to demonstrate U.S. concern about human rights and show the scale of human rights violations both in Russia and around the world.

U.S. Representative Kevin Brady, who chairs the House Ways and Means Committee's trade subcommittee, said the package had strong bipartisan support.

"We can't miss any opportunity to create jobs and support our exporters," Brady told the rules panel, referring to the trade aspect of the legislation, Reuters reported.

Congress has to grant PNTR to Russia to ensure that U.S. firms receive all the market-opening benefits of the country's entry into the World Trade Organization.

WTO rules require countries to provide each other with normal trade relations on an unconditional basis.

U.S. farm-equipment-maker John Deere, which is a strong supporter of PNTR for Russia, reiterated its position Wednesday but declined to react to the linkage of trade relations with the human rights bill.

"We believe passage is important to the heavy-equipment industries in which we sell our products," spokesman Ken Golden said. "We welcome continued progress in the effort to approve PNTR in the U.S. Congress. However, we do not feel it would be appropriate for Deere to comment on any effort to link the PNTR passage with other legislation."

Many U.S. lawmakers were opposed to removing the Jackson-Vanik amendment without putting in place new human rights legislation to keep pressure on Moscow. The Senate Finance Committee developed a similar bill that aims to punish human rights violators anywhere in the world.

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