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Another Blow to Russia's Bid to Boost Soft Power

By Peter Rutland

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The re-election of Barack Obama raised hopes that U.S.-Russian relations could be launched on a fresh course. The nightmare scenario of a Mitt Romney presidency staffed with neocons has been averted.

But the ink was barely dry on Obama's electoral returns when the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Magnitsky Act, sanctioning individuals deemed to be involved in the persecution and death of Sergei Magnitsky in 2009. The bill now goes to the Senate for approval, where it is likely to pass, although some senators favor widening the bill so that it does not uniquely target Russia.

The good news is that the bill is tied to a repeal of the 1974 Jackson-Vanik amendment, clearing the way for the granting of permanent normal trade relations, in conformity with Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov condemned the bill, arguing that it violates principles of "mutual respect, equal rights and noninterference in internal affairs." As with the Pussy Riot affair, Moscow has a neuralgic reaction to any Western criticism of its human rights record.

But the Magnitsky case is not a purely internal Russian affair. It began with the seizure of assets of Hermitage Capital, and Magnitsky worked for the Firestone Duncan law firm, which was founded by American lawyers. Even aside from human rights considerations, the U.S. has a clear and legitimate interest in sending a signal to other countries that if you abuse Western businesses and their personnel, there will be consequences.

Russian critics are convinced that the Magnitsky Act is part of some devious scheme to isolate Russia, but they cannot come up with any specific ways in which the U.S. would benefit from such a strategy. On the contrary, the U.S. stands to pay a considerable price if Russia were to respond by, for example, shutting down the northern route that gives the U.S. transit access to Afghanistan.

The primary factor motivating the U.S. response are the outrageous facts of Magnitsky's treatment. Then-President Dmitry Medvedev's own human rights commission reported in July 2011 that Magnitsky was probably beaten prior to his death.

Russia will never succeed in its campaign to be accepted as a regular member of the community of nations if it doesn't realize that human rights really matter. Nor will there be any benefit from spending millions of dollars on campaigns to promote Russia's "soft power" if the message those media carry is a crude defense of indefensible actions by Russian officials.

Peter Rutland is a professor of government at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.

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