

Former FSB Chief 'Met With' Co-Author of Magnitsky Act

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Nikolai Kovalyov

A spymaster-turned-lawmaker has met with a U.S. senator who co-authored the Magnitsky list to discuss tracking the undeclared property of Russian senators abroad, Izvestia reported Thursday, citing a State Duma source.

Nikolai Kovalyov, a former Federal Security Service chief who now heads the Duma's commission for monitoring the validity of deputies' income declarations, is believed to have met with Senator Ben Cardin in Vienna in February while on a visit to commemorate Soviet soldiers who fought in the Austrian city, the source said.

The source said Kovalyov was acting "on his own," without permission from his United Russia party — a move that got another Duma deputy into trouble with his own party recently.

Just Russia Deputy Dmitry Gudkov, who was expelled from his party last week for giving a speech at a U.S. forum organized by the Freedom House human rights organization,

welcomed Kovalyov's initiative, calling it a "great idea" but expressing skepticism that Kovalyov would be allowed to carry it through.

Gudkov said that his trip to the U.S. was prompted by a similar goal, namely building ties with "pro-Russian senators and congressman who want to help Russia get rid of corruption among officials."

Grigory Balykhin, another United Russia deputy on the committee that monitors income declarations, is cited by Izvestia as saying that Kovalyov's initiative "does not enter into the jurisdiction of the committee" and that the committee's procedural regulations do not allow for direct cooperation with foreign officials.

"But the idea is interesting," he said, "and I will raise the issue at a committee meeting on Thursday."

Dmitry Abzalov, an analyst at the Center for Current Politics, said Kovalyov's move would help United Russia hinder Gudkov's anti-corruption activity.

"It's a very interesting tactic. He's pulling the carpet right out from under Gudkov, who placed his bets on help from American senators," Abzalov said.

"On top of that, if Cardin doesn't provide an answer to the State Duma's request regarding the opposition, that will provide an excuse to reproach the senator for political bias. ... But the ruling party won't lose anything from such cooperation either way."

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