

Anti-Russian Sentiment in the US Congress. The Magnitsky Act. Another US Provocation against Russia

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On December 6, the US House and Senate passed as a law the so-called "Magnitsky Act," which was shortly after signed by President Barack Obama. The approval of the act was hailed by Congress and the US media as "an important step in the cause of human rights and democracy."

The law is directed specifically at Russian officials suspected of being responsible for the prison death of the financier Sergei Magnitsky in 2009, but it also contains US visa and financial sanctions against all Russian officials allegedly guilty of "gross violations of human rights." According to some media, the Act's sponsors were motivated by their hostility to Russia rather than by any real concern for democracy and human rights. In fact, the Act's main lobbyist, William Browder, head of the London-based Hermitage hedge fund, is currently under investigation in Russia on suspicion of tax evasion.

The approval of "Magnitsky Act" is also a reflection of the prevailing anti-Russian sentiment in the US Congress, said Alexander Strakanov, Director of the Institute of Russian Language, History and Culture at Lyndon College, in the state of Vermont, to the Voice of Russia. In recent years, US Congress has been undermining US-Russian cooperation in several areas from Afghanistan to international terrorism.

Some experts have pointed out that the act violates US and international law. Firstly, the list of the individuals who will be sanctioned can be based on information and data provided by US NGOs and interest groups. That means that Russian authorities can now rightly suppose that US NGOs working in Russia are involved in espionage activities. On the other hand, some US interest groups can try to promote their economic or political goals by accusing Russian officials of all kind of crimes and offences. Secondly, the act violates the principles of due process and presumption of innocence. And thirdly, it is an open interference in Russia's internal affairs.

"I qualify the Magnistky Act as a discriminatory law against Russia", said Russian political observer Mikhail Remizov told the Voice of Russia. "Moreover, the act presupposes arrests of Russian citizens in the US without any decision of any court, which is an unprecedented step. It is only a court that has the

right to take such decisions, not any political body. I believe that this decision was politically motivated. The fact that this decision was initiated by a congressman and approved by the US State Secretary is evidence that it was politically motivated.”

✘ President Putin called the approval of the Magnitsky Act “unfriendly and political” and added that even if there had not been a Magnitsky case, the US authorities would have probably invented another pretext to show that the United States is “the boss of the entire world”, although no one has ever given this country the authority to be such. “If the US adopts any other discriminatory laws against Russia like the Magnitsky Act, Russia will also respond with more sanctions against the US,” President Putin warned. Putin made it clear that the US has no legitimacy to criticize other countries on the human rights issue and recalled the “medieval” conditions at Guantanamo Bay. “At Guantanamo, they keep people in prison for years without any charges,” Putin said at a news conference in Moscow. “People there go around in shackles, like in medieval times”.

Russian response

Some days after the Magnitsky Act was passed, the Russian parliament’s lower house, Duma, adopted “the Dima Yakovlev law” that suspends the activities of US NGOs operating in Russia. The law also bans those US officials, who have illegally put Russian nationals to prison or sentenced Russian citizens to “unreasonably severe punishments”, from receiving entry visas to Russia. A similar ban has been put in place against agents of US secret services who have kidnapped Russian citizens.

Besides, the law sets a ban for US citizens to adopt Russian children. The law was dubbed “Dima Yakovlev” in memory of a Russian boy who died because his American adoptive father forgot him in a car. It is only another case in which Russian children have been neglected, humiliated or even killed by US adoptive parents. In the last 20 years, 19 Russian children have been killed by their US adoptive parents or died due to their US adoptive parents’ faults.

At the same time, Russia has required all shipments of US meat to be tested and proved free of a controversial animal feed additive: the ractopamine. The measure effectively amounts to a ban because the US considers ractopamine safe and does not test for it. However, the US claims that the move violates WTO regulations. “These Russian demands constitute a political retaliation to the US Senate passing the Magnitsky Act,” ITAR-TASS quoted unnamed representatives of the US Meat Export Federation as saying.

Strategic clash

In reality, the “Magnitsky Act” is another sign of the deterioration of the relations between the United States and Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry stated that the act was “nothing but a vindictive desire to counter Russia in world affairs”.

Russia has rejected NATO expansionist policies and has blocked the incorporation of Ukraine and Georgia into the Western alliance. At the same time, Moscow had condemned the deployment of parts of a US missile defense system (ABM) in Eastern Europe because it threatens Russian nuclear missiles, which are the pillar of the Russian power and deterrence.

In the Middle East, Moscow and Washington have also different approaches.

Moscow regards the US-led efforts to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a major threat to Russian interests in the Middle East. Russia also rejects US's policy – based on sanctions and threats – towards the Iranian nuclear energy program. These and other issues have brought both countries closer to a new cold war. Russia is backed by China in its opposition to Western aggressive policies towards Syria and Iran.

A joint statement at the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which took place in Beijing in June 2012, stated that Russia and China would keep on safeguarding the “fruits of the Second World War and the post-war political order, according to the United Nations' Charter and the basic principles of international law.”

This statement was a direct warning to the United States, which both Russia and China have criticized for violating international law during the military interventions in Iraq and Libya. A Russian media outlet said: “Members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have established effective cooperation to protect their interests against some global powers that are used to settling problems by force.” This was clearly an announcement that the SCO will not allow the US to penetrate into the Eurasian heartland or change unfriendly regimes, which has strong links with Moscow and Beijing.

Therefore, China and Russia are trying to make the SCO a coordinating body for the states of Central and South Asia in the sphere of economic and security cooperation. The block has become a more valuable and effective tool for them in order to counter the US's containment strategy toward them.

At the same time, Moscow is trying to create another block, the Eurasian Union, similar to the European Union. In November, Russia signed an agreement with Belarus and Kazakhstan as a first step towards this goal. Other eight countries are expected to join the new organization.

For its part, the US is worried about the Russia and China's attempts to achieve an Eurasian economic and political integration under their influence. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned in December that Washington would do its best to prevent or slow down what she said was a Russian attempt to “re-Sovietize” the former Soviet space.

“It is going to be called a customs union, it will be called Eurasia Union and all of that. But let's make no mistake about it. We know what the goal is and we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it,” she said. For his part, Putin said that Clinton's remarks were “rubbish.”

Yusuf Fernandez is a journalist and the secretary of the Muslim Federation of Spain. He started to work for Radio Prague. He has been editor of several Islamic sites in Spanish and English and is currently editor of the Spanish site of Al Manar. He has also published articles in leading Spanish newspapers.

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