

EU Visa Threat Terrifies Officials, Browder Says

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The  **Moscow Times**

The threat of a European Union visa ban for 60 Russian officials implicated in the death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky "terrifies" them and other officials, William Browder, the founder of Hermitage Capital Management, said Friday.

The Foreign Ministry on Thursday condemned the European Parliament's foreign affairs committee for recommending the visa ban in a unanimous vote Tuesday as "direct interference" in the country's internal affairs.

London-based Hermitage, once the largest foreign investment fund in Russia, is urging countries in Europe and North America to sanction Russian officials it has linked to the death of Magnitsky in a Moscow jail in November 2009.

"The European Parliament's voice is particularly significant because all the people who took Sergei's life want to enjoy their freedom to travel to Europe," Browder said in e-mailed comments. "This initiative terrifies Russian officials."

Magnitsky, a 37-year-old lawyer advising Hermitage, died after almost a year in pretrial detention during which he said he was abused and denied medical treatment to force him to drop fraud allegations against officials.

President Dmitry Medvedev has made fighting corruption one of his key objectives as he seeks to attract foreign investors to reduce Russia's reliance on oil, gas and other raw materials.

In the United States, Senator Benjamin Cardin and Congressman James McGovern, both Democrats, introduced legislation Sept. 29 that would freeze the assets of and ban visas for the officials accused of involvement in Magnitsky's death. Lawmakers in the Canadian parliament are also seeking to introduce similar legislation.

The EU Parliament's foreign affairs committee adopted by a 50-0 vote a draft text of the annual human-rights report that will be submitted for approval by the full assembly in mid-December.

The report "calls for an EU entry ban for the 60 Russian officials involved in this case and asks the EU law-enforcement agencies to cooperate in freezing the bank accounts and other assets of these Russian officials in all EU member states."

Browder's list of those responsible for Magnitsky's death includes officials from the Federal Security Service, the Interior Ministry, the Prosecutor General's Office, the Federal Tax Service and the Federal Prison Service.

The Foreign Ministry said in a statement that European lawmakers were trying to "openly put pressure on judicial authorities of the Russian Federation," warning that the move would affect ties with Russia.

The Investigative Committee of the Prosecutor General's Office is probing officials accused of involvement in Magnitsky's death. Alexander Bastrykin, who heads the panel, said in a September interview with state-run Rossiiskaya Gazeta that there was "no reason" to believe Magnitsky's death was connected to the activities of those prosecuting the criminal case against him.

Russia last year put Browder on its international "wanted" list, saying he and Magnitsky participated in tax evasion that deprived the government of more than 500 million rubles (\$16 million).

Hermitage, which once had assets of \$4 billion in Russia, has denied wrongdoing, calling the charges retribution for Magnitsky accusing Interior Ministry officials of stealing more than \$230 million of state funds.

The Interior Ministry on Nov. 16 accused Magnitsky of involvement in the \$230 million fraud, which entailed falsely claiming tax rebates for Hermitage's companies in Russia.

Hermitage says ministry officials seized documents from its Moscow offices in June 2007 that enabled them to re-register ownership of its three Russian funds and fraudulently obtain the tax rebates.

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