

EU Backs Asset Freeze in Magnitsky's Death

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BRUSSELS — The European Parliament urged EU governments Thursday to freeze the assets of Russian officials involved in the prison death of Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, and pressed the Russian government to do more to punish those who commit crimes against Kremlin critics.

The parliament also encouraged European Union states to ban visas for the officials but, after Russian lobbying in recent days, softened the language of the resolution focusing on Magnitsky's death.

The resolution is nonbinding, and EU governments did not immediately comment on whether they would take action against Russian officials. Magnitsky's lawyers, however, called the resolution a key step toward bringing justice and pressuring Moscow to show its commitment to rule of law. The Kremlin press service did not comment on the vote.

The parliament voted 318-163 with 95 abstentions for a measure that "encourages EU law enforcement agencies to cooperate in freezing bank accounts and other assets" in Europe of

Russian officials involved in the case. The measure also urges EU members "to consider imposing an EU entry ban for Russian officials involved in this case."

The U.S. Congress is considering a similar measure.

The measure does not name the targeted Russians, but Magnitsky's colleagues have identified 60 officials, including relatively senior figures in the Interior Ministry.

Magnitsky died last year at age 37 when the pancreatitis he developed in jail was left untreated. The case is being scrutinized as a barometer of President Dmitry Medvedev's commitment to the rule of law and also of investment-hungry Russia's true openness to foreign capital.

Magnitsky had been charged with tax evasion linked to his defense of Hermitage Capital, a multibillion-dollar fund headed by U.S.-British investor William Browder, who was barred from Russia as a national security threat in 2005.

Hermitage has accused Interior Ministry officers of illegally taking over assets it managed and using them fraudulently to reclaim \$230 million in taxes from the state.

"We've succeeded," Browder said after the vote, adding that he would approach EU member states such as Poland early next year to urge them to impose visa bans.

If the officials are banned from one country within Europe's so-called Schengen border-free zone, then they are banned from all the other countries in the zone.

Medvedev fired several top prison officials over Magnitsky's death and has pledged a full investigation. No one has been prosecuted in the case.

Fifty Western politicians and scholars, including former Foreign Ministers David Miliband of Britain and Bernard Kouchner of France and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, condemned Magnitsky's death in an open letter this week.

The letter also expressed concern about the case of jailed oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky. On Wednesday, a Russian judge postponed the long-awaited verdict in Khodorkovsky's second trial.

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