

U.S. Sponsor of Magnitsky Act Says He Was Denied Russian Visa

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A senior U.S. lawmaker and human rights advocate says he's been denied a Russian visa, citing his sponsorship of the recently passed and highly controversial Magnitsky Act as the reason for the refusal.

In an interview with The Cable blog on Foreign Policy's website, Chris Smith, chairman of the U.S. Congress Foreign Affairs subcommittee on human rights and an author of the Magnitsky Act, said that although the Russian government did not disclose the reason for the denial, his work on the Magnitsky bill was the real reason.

"This is the first time [I've been denied]," Smith said. "I was shocked. During the worst days of the Soviet Union I went there repeatedly."

U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul reportedly tried to intervene on the lawmaker's behalf, Smith said, but with no luck.

Smith also met with Russian Ambassador to the United States Sergei Kislyak, who said that the decision was made in Moscow, not at the Russian Embassy in Washington.

Smith, a House Representative for New Jersey, is widely known as one of the most prominent human rights advocates among the U.S. political elite. He was one of the authors of the On Democracy in Russia Act of 2002, and he also repeatedly called for suspending Russia's membership in the G8, citing a lack of media freedom and human rights violations.

The Magnitsky bill that Smith sponsored prohibited Russian officials thought to be responsible for the death of Sergei Magnitsky from entering the U.S. and holding U.S. bank accounts.

The Russian government's response to the bill was vehemently negative. The so-called "Anti-Magnitsky Act" banning American citizens from adopting Russian children was passed by the State Duma in retaliation.

As for the purpose of Smith's planned visit, he described it as "pro-engagement" and said he wanted to discuss Russia's reaction to the Magnitsky Act and address Russia's concerns over the treatment of adopted Russian children in the U.S.

"I even have a resolution that highlights the fact that those 19 kids died," he said.

"If somebody is responsible for this, they ought to pay a price," he said. "I was going over to talk about adoption and human trafficking. They have legitimate concerns that we have to meet."

Smith said that he intends to file another visa application.

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