

15/09/2024, 10:50

Canadian Lawmakers Say Pro-Russia Group Tried to Derail Sanctions Law - The New York Times

**The New York Times** | <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/04/world/canada/russia-magnitsky.html>

# *Canadian Lawmakers Say Pro-Russia Group Tried to Derail Sanctions Law*

**By Dan Levin and Jo Becker**

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As Canadian lawmakers took up legislation on Wednesday that would bar businesses from dealing with foreigners who have committed human rights abuses, a nonprofit group called the Russian Congress of Canada pushed hard against the measure.

The lawmakers say the effort was part of a broader lobbying campaign orchestrated by Russia against such laws, including one in the United States. Canadian human rights advocates say they were also singled out.

The pro-Russia group denies any connection to the Kremlin, but lawmakers say the push fits a pattern of Moscow-backed interference in the West. And they say that the lobbying campaign, which began in 2014 and grew with attacks last spring on Canada's foreign affairs minister, Chrystia Freeland, highlights the dangers of Russian meddling in Canada.

Nonetheless, the bill passed unanimously in Parliament on Wednesday evening. It allows Canada to sanction, freeze assets or deny entry to foreigners from any country that has violated human rights or engaged in corruption.

15/09/2024, 10:50

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“Everybody realizes that some organizations are being used as a proxy for Putin,” James Bezan, a conservative member of Parliament and a supporter of the bill said. “These groups are trying to disrupt and discredit this legislation in Canada and democracy within our own borders.”

The legislation, informally known as the Sergei Magnitsky Law, is named for a lawyer who died in a Russian prison under mysterious circumstances after exposing one of the biggest government corruption scandals during President Vladimir V. Putin’s time in power.

In an interview, John McKay, a Liberal member of Parliament, dismissed the group as a front for the Russian Embassy in Ottawa and cited its lobbying activities in his concerns over interference by the Russian government in Canadian affairs. “We are concerned about the business of fake news and misinformation,” he said.

He said his suspicions of coordination between the Russian government and the group deepened after a speech he gave on the issue in Parliament on Monday, when he received an email from the Russian Embassy spokesman, Kirill Kalanin, that included articles making similar pro-Russian arguments mentioned in a letter from the group.

15/09/2024, 10:50

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Sergei L. Magnitsky, a lawyer who died in a Russian prison.

“Their tactics are so amateurish they’re not even subtle,” Mr. McKay said. “It’s so stupid that the dullest among us can see through that.”

The president of the group, Igor Babalich, said in an interview that his group did not coordinate with the Russian Embassy or take orders from Moscow.

“We are a completely independent nonprofit organization,” said Mr. Babalich, who worked for a decade, until December 2016, as a software engineer at The Globe and Mail, the Toronto newspaper.

He added that the group was founded on behalf of Russian-speaking Canadians who are “tired of the increase in anti-Russian information campaigns.”

“We don’t have any connection to the embassy,” he said.

15/09/2024, 10:50

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Officials at the Russian Embassy did not respond to requests for comment. On its website the embassy posted a statement calling the bill “a deplorably confrontational act blatantly interfering into Russia’s domestic affairs.” The statement added, “This hostile move, as well as any new anti-Russian sanctions, will be met with resolve and reciprocal countermeasures.”

Marcus Kolga, a human rights advocate and the editor of UpNorth, a European foreign policy analysis publication in Toronto, said that information from the group, pro-Russia websites and the embassy is intended “to erode trust in our officials and democratic institutions, in that sense it’s very similar to what’s happening in the United States.”

Of the group, he added, “To call it a grass-roots organization that represents the Russian community in Canada is pure nonsense.”

Since it was founded in 2014, the Russian Congress of Canada and its members, including a priest at a Russian Orthodox church in Toronto, have promoted political views strongly aligned with the interests of Mr. Putin.

In addition to organizing rallies and parades in Canada celebrating the anniversary of Germany’s surrender to the Soviet Union in World War II, the group has written scores of letters to Canadian politicians and articles that lobbied against Canada’s involvement in NATO; condemned Ottawa’s criticism of the Russian invasion of Ukraine; and questioned the integrity of Ms. Freeland by citing claims that her Ukrainian grandfather was a Nazi collaborator.

Those claims were first reported on pro-Kremlin websites and spread after she was appointed minister of foreign affairs in January.

15/09/2024, 10:50

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Natalia Veselnitskaya, a lawyer, has led efforts in the United States to undo the Magnitsky law, which froze assets held in the United States by Russian officials responsible for human rights abuses. Ms. Veselnitskaya, known as a formidable operator with a history of pushing the Kremlin's agenda, said she had no connection to lobbying against the Canadian version of the bill. Yury Martyanov/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In June, the organization sent letters to members of Parliament calling for Canada to withdraw its support of the Magnitsky legislation. Claiming to be representatives of the Russian diaspora in Canada, the group said the bill would harm Canada's interests, while accusing its supporters of anti-Russian bias.

In discussing accusations that Mr. Magnitsky was beaten in prison, the letter suggested that deaths in Canadian prisons could be used as a basis for sanctions against Canadian officials by other governments.

15/09/2024, 10:50

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Adam Austen, the press secretary for the foreign affairs minister, said the new Canadian law would enable Canada to hold foreigners accountable for human rights violations and corruption. He added that the government was aware of the risks posed by foreign meddling in Western affairs.

“We are of course preoccupied by this threat and are committed to protecting the integrity of our democracy here at home,” he said.

The Magnitsky law and efforts to expand it globally have enraged the Russian president.

But to critics of Mr. Putin, Mr. Magnitsky, in death, has become a symbol of corruption and brutality in the Russian state.

In the United States, efforts to undo the Magnitsky law have been led by a lawyer, Natalia Veselnitskaya, who is in private practice but has a reputation as a formidable operator with a history of pushing the Kremlin’s agenda. Her efforts included the creation of a Delaware-based nonprofit organization, the Human Rights Accountability Global Initiative, which in turn hired a team of high-priced lobbyists and consultants.

On Facebook, Ms. Veselnitskaya denounced all iterations of the law, including the Canadian legislation.

Reached by email on Wednesday, Ms. Veselnitskaya said she had no connection to lobbying against the Canadian bill. “I did not participate,” she said.

Ms. Veselnitskaya’s efforts to repeal the American law also included a June 9, 2016, meeting at Trump Tower with Donald Trump Jr., the president’s eldest son. He arranged the meeting, in the midst of the United States presidential campaign, after he was explicitly promised dirt on Hillary Clinton that was described as “part of Russia and its government’s support for Mr. Trump.”

15/09/2024, 10:50

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The meeting, which was first reported by The New York Times, is now a focus of the investigation by the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, into Russian interference in the American election and possible collusion with the Trump campaign.

Sophia Kishkovsky contributed reporting.

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