

Human rights back on the agenda of Russia's relations with the West

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Moscow has reacted sharply to the US Senate's adoption on 6 December of the 'Magnitsky Act', which imposes visa and financial sanctions against Russian government officials involved in the investigation against the lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in prison in 2009. Just five days later, the President of the State Duma Sergei Naryshkin introduced a similar bill providing for sanctions against American citizens who have violated the rights of Russians. The first reading of the draft is scheduled for 14 December. The Russian Foreign Ministry described the adoption of the 'Magnitsky Act' as 'the theatre of the absurd', and warned that it would have a negative impact on bilateral relations; the head of Russian diplomacy Sergei Lavrov called it an 'anti-Russian prank'.

This ostentatious reaction to the 'Magnitsky Act' was preceded by a presentation from Minister Lavrov on 6 December to the OSCE's Council of Ministers, in which he emphasised the disturbing human rights situation in Western countries. The same day, the Russian Foreign Ministry published a report on human rights violations in the European Union.

Commentary

- Russia's reaction to the 'Magnitsky Act' and the increased attention of Russian diplomacy to human rights issues seem primarily to be a consequence of the weakening legitimacy of the ruling team in Russia. Since the appearance last autumn of a significant opposition, which has gained relatively substantial support, Moscow has been trying to divert attention from human rights violations in Russia by searching for such cases in the West, in a manner reminiscent of Soviet practices.
- This reaction is part of Russian diplomacy's ongoing efforts over the last few years to obtain international recognition of Russia's 'specificity' in this area, invoking Russia's equal right with the West to interpret standards of democracy and human rights. The aim is to strengthen the legitimacy of the Russian system of government, and to provide an ideological justification for Russia's attempts to create institutional barriers which will protect it from 'importing' Western standards, especially in the area of electoral procedures. They are also aimed at creating an ideological foundation for Russia's integration activities in the post-Soviet area. This seems also to be the purpose of the

Russian initiative, announced at the last session of the Council of Ministers of the OSCE, to create common standards for monitoring elections and limiting the autonomy of the OSCE's Office of Democracy and Human Rights.

- Russia's international activity in the human rights sphere comes against a background of intensified anti-Western rhetoric, which has been observed for several months and is intended for domestic consumption; and of limiting the activity in Russia of Western organisations, as demonstrated by the expulsion of USAID.
- Moscow's actions may also be intended to prevent the European Union from adopting provisions modelled on the 'Magnitsky Act'; a resolution on this matter was passed in the European Parliament in October. The introduction of visa and financial restrictions by the EU would be more serious for the Russian elite than US sanctions, because Western Europe is their main travel destination as well as a prime location for them to invest their money.