

Alexei Navalny

The Magnitsky Law should be approved

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In July 2013, Alexei Navalny was sentenced to five years in prison for embezzlement. This charge was seen by Russian civil society and international human rights organisations as revenge for his oppositional activities in Russia.

I feel that I have a personal connection with the “Magnitsky Case”. Although I didn’t know Sergei personally, as a lawyer, he was a colleague. He investigated cases of corruption, which I also try to do. Sergei Magnitsky did it better than me, to the benefit of Russian society, but which brought martyrdom for him and tragedy for his family.

There was one episode in the case which particularly struck me: already dying and in constant pain, Magnitsky asked the judge for permission to have a glass of boiling water to mix with the dried noodles that he was eating. The judge refused. He ate the noodles dry. In the 21st century, in peacetime, an innocent man dying in prison and can’t even get a glass of hot water – and the bastard in epaulettes, condemning the man to death, smirks while buying himself a Mercedes and a new dacha.

The strength of the US “Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act” lies in the fact that it rests on a straightforward proposition: that the people who are robbing the Russian treasury – that is, who are robbing the Russian taxpayer – of 5.4 billion roubles, who killed Magnitsky, and who investigated the affair, should be punished.

A full and fair investigation of this case hasn’t been conducted in Russia

for a very simple reason: the thieves and swindlers that made off with 5.4 billion roubles and killed Magnitsky are still continuing to commit these crimes. Magnitsky only exposed a small part of the operation - but the greater part involves stealing money from the Russian budget and feeding the machine of the “top brass”, before diverting enormous sums out of the country and paying themselves informal “salaries” in cash.

Russians must not be naïve and think that the Americans or the Europeans will resolve our problems for us. They won't. But if there is no effective law in our country, the thieves in the Kremlin should at least be punished abroad. Their foreign visas should be cancelled and their foreign assets - stolen from Russian taxpayers - should be seized.

What scares the party of crooks and thieves, otherwise known as United Russia? If they are honest patriots, why should they go into hysterics at the thought that they won't be able to travel to the West, and their Western bank accounts will be frozen? Don't they themselves say that they don't want to go to the West and that they have no bank accounts there?

The truth is, Kremlin bureaucrats aren't interested in anti-missile defence, or the expansion of NATO, or the conflict in Syria. Russia's internal politics are directed at defending the people that killed a citizen of Russia and robbed taxpayers of 5.4 billion roubles.

In Putin's Russia - which resembles an organised crime syndicate more than a government - no questions are asked about politically loyal billionaires. How they earned their money and how they run their business is their own affair. Corruption is the norm. But supremacy of law exists in the countries of the European Union, to say nothing of the moral, political and financial duty of the state to defend its citizens from the importation of corruption. For example, the British Bribery Act of 2010 dictates a sentence of ten years in prison for bribery of foreign officials. How many Russian billionaires would be subjected to such measures?

Not one bureaucrat or head of a state-owned company should have the ability to “earn” millions from his job and send that money to another country, while pretending to be a law-abiding citizen.

The governments and citizens of the European Union should ask more questions about the origins of the Russian wealth that makes its way to Europe. They should distinguish more carefully between the honest Russian businessmen who want to live, work and invest in European countries from those that earned millions through corruption and use the West to legitimise their dirty money.

The ranks of the United Russia Party are full of “patriots” ready to “repel the enemy” on a moment’s notice, who nevertheless prefer to keep their savings in the West. One such “patriot” is the governor of the Pskov Oblast, Andrey Turchak, head of the “Young Guard” of United Russia, which specializes in accusing the Russian opposition of being agents of Western interests. In response, the Foundation for the Fight Against Corruption revealed that, since 2006, while this public servant and United Russia member spouted pseudo-patriotic drivel about United Russia opposing the Western menace, SCI, a company registered to his wife, brother and father, owned a villa in Nice worth €1,270,000. This, naturally, was never mentioned in any of the declarations by this “people’s servant”.

Another “patriotic” member of United Russia is the ex-head of the Duma ethics commission, Vladimir Pekhtin. According to the open property registers of the US state of Florida, Pekhtin is the owner, together with his son, of elite property in Miami Beach and Ormond Beach worth over \$2 million (€1.6 million). This property was not disclosed in any of Pekhtin’s Duma declarations. He only once declared ownership of any substantial income during his entire time as a deputy: 39 million roubles (€969,000) in 2006. Considering the fact that Pekhtin has been in the Duma since 1999, has had to eat, drink and dress all that time, and owns a large number of properties in Russia and for investment in sunny Florida, this sum appears insufficient relative to his lifestyle. As with everybody in United Russia, the money must have just appeared by itself, and to ask further questions would be unethical.

Practically all members of United Russia hold undeclared property and live beyond their means. This is easily explained; they joined United Russia so that they can steal with impunity. Such is the rational model of behaviour for a thief in our country: in any uncertain situation, join the party in power and declare that Putin should be president for life.

When Putin and his gang say that the Magnitsky Law is “anti-Russian”, that is total nonsense. The law is pro-Russian. It is a law that defends the citizens of Russia, who have been plundered by this government. Only the thieves in United Russia, laundering their money in foreign banks, are afraid of this law, because the Magnitsky Act is directed against murderers and gangsters, who are the real enemies of our country and people. It should be supported.