

UK “Magnitsky bill” escalates US-led anti-Russia offensive

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Labour MP Ian Austin introduced a sanctions (Human Rights Abuse and Corruption) bill in parliament Wednesday. It was tabled as a private member’s bill, which is a mechanism for backbench MPs to gain a first reading of any proposed legislation.

The bill is trailed as a means of giving the British home secretary powers to impose sanctions against those found guilty of corruption and human rights abuses in general. More properly, it is part of the US-led campaign of anti-Russian hysteria, aimed at legitimising an escalation of preparations for war against Moscow.

Austin’s bill mirrors the US Magnitsky Act, passed under the Obama administration in 2012 with overwhelming bipartisan support. This enabled the US government to impose financial and visa sanctions against Russians accused of involvement in the arrest, prosecution and detention of Sergei Magnitsky, an accountant for Hermitage Capital Management, who died in a Russian jail in 2009.

Earlier this year, the UK passed a “Magnitsky” amendment to the Criminal Finances Bill, enabling the government to freeze the UK assets of those deemed to have violated human rights. However, Austin complains that the British government has thus far not utilised these powers. The right-wing Labour MP is part of a cross-party effort--currently by a minority within parliament--to build pressure for a far more aggressive stance against Moscow.

Presenting his bill, Austin praised Conservative MP Dominic Raab for introducing the amendment to the Criminal Finance Bill, but said it was necessary to “give the government powers to sanction individuals found guilty of corruption and human rights abuse with visa bans, asset freezes and public placement on a list of banned foreign criminals.”

Although the bill cannot concern a specific case, Austin made sure it was peppered with references to Magnitsky and denunciations of Moscow. In an anti-communist diatribe, he accused Russian President Vladimir Putin--one of the chief protagonists of capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union--of representing the continuity of the “Soviet era.”

Claiming that Magnitsky’s murderers are being protected by “Russia’s thuggish president,” he argued, “It is easy to boast about our country’s commitment to its values--democracy, freedom, fairness and respect for the rule of law--but they must stand for something, and that is why we cannot ignore appalling crimes like the murder of Sergei Magnitsky.”

It is impossible to know the truth or otherwise of the various charges and counter-charges surrounding Magnitsky’s death. Clearly, he was denied his basic rights at the hands of the Russian criminal justice system, being held without trial for almost a year and having urgent medical care withheld when he became sick. Sadly, such brutal treatment is by no means unique to Russia, but it is widespread in Russian prisons, as well as those in the US.

It is also the case that Putin is the representative of an oligarchy that has enriched itself from the plunder of Soviet assets. But so too is William F. Browder, the London-based multi-millionaire hedge fund founder who is leading the campaign for anti-Russian sanctions, using Magnitsky’s death as the pretext.

Browder was a key financial player and ally of Putin and the Russian oligarchy from 1995 to the late 2000s. But they fell out over Browder’s investments in Gazprom when he was accused of attempting to illegally purchase shares, leading to the closure of his Russian operation.

Browder says that Magnitsky was jailed on trumped-

up charges and murdered because he uncovered a giant multimillion-dollar tax fraud involving Russian government officials.

Opponents accuse Browder of being involved in the fraud uncovered by Magnitsky and of being linked to the accountant's death. Putin has even accused Browder of being a "serial killer" for his alleged involvement in the mysterious deaths of three other men, also connected to the fraud.

In this fall-out among thieves, one fundamental principle must be observed: The task of dealing with Putin and the gangsters in the Kremlin belongs to the Russian working class, not the US and British bourgeoisie, who are, if anything, even more criminal and venal than their Moscow counterparts.

When Austin invokes human rights, he does so on behalf of a ruling elite that concocted false "evidence" against Iraq over supposed weapons of mass destruction. This was part of a conspiracy with the US to launch an illegal war that destroyed the country and initiated a series of pre-emptive interventions across the region.

The numbers present at the bill's reading were small, but Austin was most enthused at the fact that it drew cross-party backing, including Green MP Caroline Lucas and several Tories. Yvette Cooper and Dame Margaret Hodge were present from Labour. They, like Austin, are leading critics of party leader Jeremy Corbyn for supposedly being "soft" on Russia.

In the House of Lords, Labour's Baroness Helena Kennedy QC is piloting a similar measure to that proposed by Austin, titled the "Cancellation of UK Visas for Gross Human Rights Abuses Bill 2017."

In November, Austin and Kennedy helped organise a forum in parliament involving the Henry Jackson Society to discuss a Magnitsky Justice campaign. The Henry Jackson Society is a right-wing British-American think tank closely associated with the Iraq war. It is represented by the likes of Richard Perle, former US assistant secretary of defence, and William Kristol, founding editor of the neo-conservative *Weekly Standard* and co-founder of the notorious pro-war think tank Project for a New American Century.

The political character of this campaign is underscored by its supporters internationally.

In December 2016, Estonia passed a Magnitsky law involving travel bans against Russian officials. It is

leading the drive for an extension of such bans across Europe. This small Eastern European country is now in the front line of the US and NATO military encirclement of Russia, hosting NATO combat troops. In September 2014, then-US President Barack Obama gave Estonia's right-wing government carte blanche to launch a provocation against Moscow and receive NATO and US military assistance, assuring "people in Estonia: their security is our security."

Estonia's parliament has praised Estonian members of Hitler's Waffen-SS as "freedom fighters" against the Soviet Union, and August 28--the day the Waffen-SS recruited members of the Estonian Defence League--is celebrated each year as a national holiday.

Estonia currently holds the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. It is in this capacity that an alliance of Members of the European Parliament, led by former Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, has called on Estonia to use its position to "act and finally adopt EU-wide sanctions, visa bans and asset freezes" against Russia, using Magnitsky's death as justification.

In November, Lithuania, another key player in the military build-up against Russia in the Baltics, unanimously passed its own version of the Magnitsky Act, which will become active in January.

One month before, Canada, which is also playing a leading role in the NATO build-up in Europe, adopted its version of the Magnitsky Act with all-party support. The Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act (Bill S-226) enables the government to freeze Canadian assets of foreign officials and prevent them from entering Canada.



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