

EU 'cannot exclude' US-type sanctions on Russian officials

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The EU has said it "cannot exclude" the possibility of punitive measures against Russian officials if Moscow fails to adequately investigate the murder of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky.

"It is of great importance for Russia's future that this case is investigated properly by the Russian judicial authorities, and that those responsible for any wrongdoing are brought to justice," European External Action Service spokesman Michael Mann said in a written statement to this website.

"Should this not take place, we cannot exclude further reactions by the EU or its member states."

The statement was sent in reply to questions if the EU will follow the US in imposing a visa ban on 60 Russian officials. The group is believed to have embezzled €160 million in tax money and killed Magnitsky when he exposed the scam.

The US took the step in July despite Russian threats of retaliation - Russian daily Kommersant on Wednesday (10 August) reported that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has ordered his own blacklist of "several dozen" US officials.

The deadline for any EU reaction is late August when the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation is expected to complete its probe into the Magnitsky affair.

The committee has so far named two prison doctors for giving him inadequate medical treatment.

Magnitsky's mother and his former employer, UK-based venture capitalist Bill Browder, say this is a bid to scapegoat junior officials while letting senior suspects, such as the head of the Moscow tax authority, Olga Stepanova, off the hook.

Two recent developments augur badly for EU requests to see justice.

In July the interior ministry voided the findings of Medvedev's Human Rights Council after it said ministry officials were guilty of stealing money and that Magnitsky was murdered in prison.

Last week the ministry said it will prosecute Magnitsky - who died in 2009 - for alleged tax evasion. The move is widely seen as a smear campaign.

"The Russian government has shown no intention of prosecuting the real culprits at high levels in the interior ministry who tortured and killed Sergei Magnitsky. As a result, there has been a distinct shift in the attitude of the EU toward this case," Browder told this website.

"Ultimately, the EU will follow the US in imposing visa sanctions and eventually both will freeze the assets of those people responsible."