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MENENDEZ CALLS ON TRUMP ADMINISTRATION TO CONFRONT RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AND DEFEND DEMOCRACY FROM FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

"I HOPE THAT PRESIDENT TRUMP AND OUR SECRETARY OF STATE WILL START
TREATING THIS THREAT WITH THE SERIOUSNESS IT DESERVES... THEY SHOULD
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RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT INVESTS INTO DESTABILIZING AMERICAN
DEMOCRACY."

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Senator Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, tonight spoke on the Senate Floor calling on the Trump Administration to defend our democracy and national security against foreign interference. Menendez underscored President Trump's embrace of Putin, his refusal to impose mandatory sanctions under CAATSA, and his inability to spend a dime of the \$120 million Congress authorized to counter the Kremlin's information warfare. Below are the Senator's remarks as prepared for delivery:

I am stunned by President Trump's willful paralysis when it comes to holding Russia accountable about threats made crystal clear by our intelligence community. Indeed, it's been more than a year since 17 U.S. intelligence agencies issued their report on how the Kremlin sought to - and I quote:

‘Blend covert intelligence operations – such as cyber activity – with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users, or ‘trolls’ in order to undermine our 2016 elections.

Today, even the Administration’s own National Security Strategy warns that Russia will continue to challenge American power, influence, and security interests at home and abroad. These threats are precisely why Congress imposed a mandate on President Trump to act. Yet, time and again this president has refused to hold Russia accountable and refuses to take steps to defend our democracy and our national security.

It’s alarming, it’s reckless, and it’s absolutely unacceptable. And to be honest I also find it baffling. Here’s why.

Pick any policy issue. Chances are, since taking office President Trump has changed his mind about it at least once. Last week, he changed his positions on gun safety so many times in 24 hours it could make your head spin.

A few weeks before that, he rejected a bipartisan deal to protect Dreamers that met the very specifications he outlined to my colleagues and me just days before. And throughout the past year, the President’s remarks with respect to NATO’s Article 5, the alliance’s bedrock principle which guarantees mutual defense, have been wholly inconsistent.

But there is one thing that President Trump has shown rock solid consistency on since taking office. And that is his shameful embrace of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his refusal to protect American democratic institutions.

President Trump’s embrace of Putin has put a straightjacket on U.S. policy towards Russia. In many ways, we’re more vulnerable today than we were in 2016. Think about it. Mr. Putin made a serious gamble when he decided to interfere in our election – a gamble that would

normally draw the ire of any American President, regardless of their political party.

But as we know, nothing about this Administration is normal. And the truth is we are in greater peril today because Mr. Putin knows he has a friend in the White House. A friend who won't do anything to stop him from interfering in our democracy nor those of our allies. A friend who won't even issue a statement condemning Putin's nuclear sabre rattling last week, when he proudly showed a video simulating a nuclear attack on Florida.

It's time for the President to recognize that Mr. Putin's intentions are not up for debate. From the spread of extremist propaganda across Europe, to Russia's continued attack on Ukrainian sovereignty, to the latest revelations made public by Special Counsel Mueller's investigation, the Kremlin is orchestrating a systematic and ongoing campaign to undermine the democracies at the heart of the post-World War II international order.

Consider President Trump's response to the revelations made public by Special Counsel Robert Mueller when he indicted 13 Russians for interfering in our democracy three weeks ago.

The Special Counsel's findings left many Americans shocked by Russia's astoundingly sophisticated effort to defraud American voters, stoke division on Facebook, and sow doubt in our electoral process in 2016. And yet President Trump's only response to these stunning revelations of foreign interference?

Nothing. Not a word from the President beyond a victorious tweet once again proclaiming, No collusion.

At every turn, President Trump has dismissed the significance of Russia's interference in our elections. And his willful paralysis on Russia is on full display through the White House's refusal to impose sanctions under CAATSA, as well as the unacceptable delays in establishing

a strategy for countering the Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation.

Let's remember why Congress passed CAATSA in the first place. Why the Senate voted 98-2 and the House voted 419-3 despite overwhelming opposition from the Trump Administration. We voted to hold Russia accountable for its assault on our democracy. And we voted to increase pressure on the Kremlin to stop its illegal war against our friends in Ukraine and its aiding and abetting of war crimes in Syria.

But apparently, President Trump fails to see that these are real threats from a real foreign adversary. Real threats that undermine the integrity of our elections and therefore the security of our country. Real threats from a brutal leader who sees the erosion of western democracy as a strategic imperative for Russia's future.

We saw it in March of 2014, when Russia authorized the use of military force to illegally occupy Crimea, blatantly violating the sovereignty of the Ukrainian people - violence that continues in eastern Ukraine to this day.

We saw it in 2016, when the Kremlin's disinformation campaign targeted American voters on Facebook. We see it today, as Russia continues to spread propaganda throughout Western Europe.

Meanwhile, in the Middle East, Russia continues to prop up Assad's brutal dictatorship, dropping bombs on hospitals, homes, and humanitarian aid convoys working to help the Syrian people under-siege.

This president's schoolyard swagger stops cold when it comes to confronting the world's biggest bully: Vladimir Putin.

It's been seven months since Congress passed the CAATSA sanctions law. And while the Administration has upheld some sanctions imposed by Obama-era executive orders, it's appalling to see this White House refuse to implement sanctions that Congress made mandatory. Let me say that again -- provisions that we made mandatory.

So let me tell you what I've learned about CAATSA's implementation in the recent briefings I've received as Ranking Member on the Foreign Relations Committee and membership on the Banking Committee.

President Trump has imposed no sanctions in response to Russia's cyber aggression, as required by Section 224. President Trump has imposed no sanctions related to Russian crude oil products, as required by section 225.

President Trump has imposed no sanctions on serious human rights abusers in the Russian Federation, as required by section 228. President Trump has imposed no sanctions on those facilitating the transfer of assets owned by the Russian people to oligarchs hand-picked by Putin, as required under section 233.

President Trump has imposed no sanctions punishing Russia for its transfer of arms to Syria, as required under section 234. I could go on - but you get the picture.

The Trump Administration has refused to implement the law, despite the overwhelming bipartisan will of Congress. The Constitution made Congress a co-equal branch of government for a reason, and I take very seriously our responsibility to hold the executive branch accountable.

Given what we know about Russia's interference in European elections over the last year alone, I'm especially disappointed in the White House's failure to implement sanctions under Section 224 which sanctions anyone who knowingly undermines the cybersecurity of an

individual or a democratic institution on behalf of the Russian government.

I find it hard to believe this Administration has yet to identify one single sanctionable offense. But in case they need some tips, here's two they can look into. In November, Spain's government discovered Russian state-sponsored groups used social media to spread disinformation and influence political events in Catalonia. And just last week, the German government pointed to a massive cyber hack against its foreign ministry, allegedly carried out by a Russian state-sponsored group called Snake.

Meanwhile, our intelligence leaders - including some of those appointed by President Trump - have testified that Russia continues to interfere here in the U.S. and looks forward to doing so during the midterm elections.

Now, I've cosponsored a resolution calling upon President Trump to implement these sanctions. And while we shouldn't have to pass a resolution calling on the Administration to enforce the law we passed, we clearly do. And fortunately, we have the opportunity to do so next week when the Foreign Relations Committee meets to mark-up legislation. I urge the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee to take up this important resolution.

Let's remember that Congress also gave the Administration additional tools to thwart Russia's disinformation campaigns - an essential priority if we want to protect the integrity of our democracy. Yet it seems Russian disinformation campaigns continue to sow chaos online unabated. Every day that ticks by is one that the Russian government continues to sharpen its tools and go on the attack.

Every day that ticks by, the Russian government has further encroached on sovereign democracies. We saw it most recently when Russian trolls amplified right-wing hysteria over Congressman Devin Nunes' memo with the Twitter hashtag #releasethememo. According to

Politico, "Russian bots and their American allies gamed social media to put a flawed intelligence document atop the political agenda."

And just this week, the New York Times reported on an 'American strategic void' in response to Russian threats, highlighting the Administration's inability to spend even one of the \$120 million Congress authorized over a year ago to counter the Kremlin's information warfare.

The Defense Department last week transferred \$40 million—just a third of what was authorized—to the State Department's Global Engagement Center, though not a penny's worth of action has been taken. Why the ridiculous delay? Why not the full amount?

Any responsible President would be vigorously working to protect Americans from foreign interference aimed at undermining our democracy. Any responsible President would have communicated to the American people the seriousness of the threat and rallied our citizens to respond with classic American resilience and courage.

Any responsible President would have worked with Congress on a robust strategy and secured funding for it. And once he got the resources, any responsible President would have moved swiftly to spend it, to empower all the relevant security agencies to mobilize a collective effort to protect the integrity of our democracy.

But we don't have a responsible President. We have a president asleep at the wheel, or maybe even too scared to get in the car at all.

We cannot afford further delays that only cede more ground to Putin on the battlefield of information. Our Global Engagement Center must immediately put these funds to use blunting the effects of Russian government disinformation.

And most urgently, we need the Trump Administration to finally develop a comprehensive strategy to shore up American democracy against Russian malign influence and implementing it without delay.

I will close with this. M. President, every day that ticks by the Russian government burrows deeper into our society, cultivating extremists and sowing discord.

Consider Alexander Torshin. NPR reported that for six years, he traveled to the United States to deepen his friendships with the NRA, one of the most active extremist groups in our country. Mr. Torshin cultivated its leadership, meeting with them in Moscow.

And now, the FBI is reportedly investigating whether he funneled money through the NRA to support Trump's campaign. It's disturbing to think the NRA is so eager to cultivate ties with Putin's inner circle.

As well all know, this organization's extremism has left our country a more dangerous place, from our schools, to our movie theaters, to our concerts, to our churches.

The American people overwhelmingly want Congress to uphold its solemn responsibility to keep our families safe. Yet the NRA's opposition to commonsense gun safety laws have made this Congress more dysfunctional and less responsive to the needs of our citizens.

That to me, sounds right in line with Kremlin policy.

More than anything, I hope that President Trump and our Secretary of State will start treating this threat with the seriousness it deserves. They should appreciate the level of careful planning, resources, and energy the Russian government invests into destabilizing American democracy.

It's time to protect the integrity of our elections, and secure our democracy against the cyber threats of the 21st century – whether they come in the form of election machine tampering, or paid propaganda on social media, or targeted hacks on public officials.

But, in the meantime, President Trump's inaction speaks louder than his words. And his willful paralysis only serves to embolden our adversaries and weaken democratic institutions at home and abroad.

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