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Testimony on Russian Interference in European Elections  
Senate Select Committee on Intelligence  
Ambassador (ret.) Nicholas Burns  
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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Vice Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on Russian government interference in the European elections.

I appreciate and support the bipartisan commitment of this committee to investigate Russia's actions in the 2016 U.S. elections and its similar assault on elections in the Netherlands, France, Germany and other European countries this year and last.

This Russian campaign on both sides of the Atlantic is directed towards one overarching goal—to undermine the democracies of the West, to divide Europe from America, and to weaken both NATO and the European Union. The facts are unassailable—Russia has undertaken a new and aggressive initiative to attack the credibility of what is central and precious in our democracies—our elections. Russia's actions include the publication of outright lies on social media, fake polls, the hacking of the Hillary Clinton and Emmanuel Macron campaigns and the penetration of electoral data bases in at least 21 American states in 2016. This campaign amounts to nothing less than an existential threat to the West.

We know that Russia first practiced this hybrid assault on elections and democratic institutions in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. We know that Russia conducted a systematic campaign to intervene and interfere in the U.S. Presidential election in 2016. We know Russia is currently implementing a similar campaign in Western Europe.

These activities are part of a larger Russian strategy to reduce U.S. power and influence in the world. At the same time, Russian President Vladimir Putin has sought to expand Russia's direct influence over his neighbors. During the last decade, Putin has invaded both Georgia and Ukraine, annexed Crimea, maintained a frozen conflict in Moldova and has consistently harassed our NATO allies, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Putin is seeking to re-divide Europe south and west of the Russian Federation and to intimidate Russia's neighboring states from the Caucasus region to the Baltic Sea. In the Middle East, his military intervention in Syria in 2015 was designed, in part, to diminish U.S. power, maneuverability and credibility in the Levant. These are among the many reasons that Russia is our most dangerous adversary in the world today.

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Since the end of the Cold War, American policy towards Russia has been built on a bipartisan foundation. I served Presidents of both parties as an advisor on Russian affairs at the National Security Council and at the State Department. In both Republican and Democratic Administrations, our Presidents from George H.W. Bush to Barack Obama have tried to work with Russia where that was possible, most recently in Afghanistan, on the Iran Nuclear issue and on North Korea.

All of these Presidents resolved, however, to defend the NATO alliance against Russian aggression, to support the independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine and Georgia and to oppose Russian actions in the Balkans to undercut established governments in that region. The major U.S. and European priority for two decades now has been to advance our democracies, their leading role in global affairs and to protect the integrity of our democratic societies at home.

U.S. relations with Moscow are now at their lowest point since before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet era more than thirty years ago. There is no trust between Washington and Moscow. We have major strategic disagreements concerning the future of Europe and the Middle East. But, Russia's recent actions to diminish confidence in the integrity of our elections are a grave new threat. And they are potentially harmful to our democratic way of life.

We have learned more just in the last few weeks about how Russia has conducted these operations against our democracies. A recent report by the Atlantic Council (where I am a board member) detailed concerns in Europe that Russian operatives are employing "social bots", untruthful and fake news stories and disinformation to confuse the public debate before Germany's elections in September. That same Council report by its Digital Forensics Lab reminded its readers that the Russian government controls an effective and far-reaching global media platform comprising RT, Sputnik, NewsFront and other services. These Moscow-controlled news agencies are actively spreading false information in Germany about the parties, candidates and issues at the heart of the campaign. What is happening in Germany today happened to us last summer and autumn.

The Trump Administration, the Congress and our European allies need to meet this threat with determination, speed and effectiveness. With that in mind, I have five recommendations to make to the committee this morning.

First, and most importantly, the President and the Congress must make defeating Russia's ambitions a vital national priority. I have been impressed by the degree of bipartisanship by many members of the Congress in both parties and in both houses on this issue.

It has been nothing short of dismaying, however, that President Trump continues to deny the undeniable fact that Russian interfered in our elections in the U.S. and is doing so now in Europe.

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He has refused to launch an investigation of his own. He has not made this a priority in his conversations with Russian officials. He has taken no known steps to work with the Congress and with state and local governments to prevent such interference in our 2018 mid-term elections or in the 2020 elections beyond. Senior members of his Administration have admitted that he has never asked for their own views on this problem. And he has not given your committee's bipartisan effort to investigate and to devise countermeasures the support it clearly deserves.

Based on my service in Republican and Democratic Administrations dating back to the Presidency of Jimmy Carter, I cannot imagine any of President Trump's predecessors denying that such a problem existed. None of them would have argued, as he has publicly, that these hearings and your work are a waste of time and a problem manufactured by his political opponents. All of our previous Presidents would have understood that it was their responsibility to investigate, to be skeptical of Russian intentions and to exercise their primary duty to defend our country and our allies from Russian cyber and covert aggression.

We have heard from Secretary Tillerson and Secretary Mattis strong condemnation of Russia's actions. Our intelligence agencies are united in opposition to Moscow. The American public, based on recent polls, is also very concerned.

What we need most of all to counter Russia is for President Trump to take action. We need him to defend the United States against our most aggressive and capable adversary.

Second, the U.S. and Europe must work together to maintain our current sanctions against Russia and to reinforce them where necessary. As we learned with Iran on the nuclear issue in both the Obama and George W. Bush Administrations, sanctions are infinitely more powerful and persuasive when we combine our efforts across the Atlantic.

The Senate's recent vote by a 97-2 margin to pass a tough sanctions bill against Russian interference in our election and for its actions in Ukraine was far-sighted and right. The Senate and House must now reach an agreement on a final bill that will have a major impact on Moscow's calculations. I hope the House of Representatives will not dilute the Senate bill as our response to Russia must be unmistakably clear and powerful. And I certainly hope President Trump will not veto such a measure by arguing that he needs the flexibility to conduct relations with Russia. A hostile foreign power has intervened to sway our elections. There can be only one response—swift and harsh sanctions by the U.S. in return.

The Trump Administration should consider measures of its own to send a stiff message to Moscow. The Administration should maintain all of President Obama's sanctions on the Russian government, including to continue to deny Russian embassy officials access to their facilities in New York and

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Maryland that the U.S. wisely closed in December. This is not the time to extend olive branches to the Russian government.

As someone whose government service has been solely in the Executive Branch, I have always favored protecting the authority and power of the President to act decisively on national security issues. Given President Trump's weak and ill-advised views toward Russia, however, it is prudent for the Senate and House to insist on a process of Congressional review of the Russia sanctions so that President Trump cannot relax them before Putin has met all the conditions in the Minsk agreements and reversed the annexation of Crimea.

This is a time in our long national debate over the separation of powers that Congress must provide the tough-minded strategic leadership for our country on Russia given the President's unwillingness and inability to do so.

The U.S., Canadian and European sanctions on Russia will be even more effective if they are enforced vigorously, if violators are punished and if we fill in some of the loopholes that give European firms license to continue investments in the Russian economy when American companies cannot do so.

Third, NATO and the EU should work more closely together to strengthen our democracies in order to resist Russia's campaign to weaken us. Specifically, we should establish joint working groups of our intelligence agencies and foreign ministries to share information in real time on Russia's campaign of disruption in our elections. We should also respond quickly with efforts of our own to discredit Russian propaganda on social media and in more established print, radio and television networks. The campaign of French President Emmanuel Macron was particularly effective in recognizing Russia's disinformation campaign and then reacting quickly and effectively to expose it publicly. We in America can learn from France and other European countries on how best to counter Russia's active measures against us.

We must also work with Canada and Europe to strengthen our local and state electoral arrangements—the sanctity of voting rolls and the procedures for tabulating votes-- to harden our systems and to make them significantly more resistant to hacking and manipulation by Russian agents.

And there must be a price for Putin to pay if he continues this assault on democracy. With the benefit of hindsight, the Obama Administration should have reacted more quickly and vigorously last summer and autumn to respond to the Russian hacking of the Democratic National Committee and its effort to harm Secretary Hillary Clinton's campaign. It should have been much more transparent with the American public about what it knew and the threat it clearly posed to the election. But, at least President Obama's administration eventually took action to sanction Russian officials for the part they played in this aggression. The same cannot be said for President Trump and his administration.

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We need to learn everything possible about how Russia penetrated our campaign websites and electoral processes as there is every indication it will continue its actions against us. The United States and Europe have the capability to respond in ways that will be injurious to the Kremlin. If its interference in our elections does not stop, the U.S. should act in concert with Europe to remind Russian leaders of this central fact.

Fourth, another important way to resist and undermine Russia is to strengthen the security of our NATO allies and our other friends in Eastern Europe. President Obama and the Congress already began this effort by agreeing to the deployment of NATO battalions to Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This sent a strong signal to Russia that we will defend those NATO allies who live in Russia's shadow. The U.S. and its allies should make these deployments permanent to demonstrate our strong resolve.

The Congress has also funded during the last two years a substantial rebuilding of the U.S. military's armored strength in Europe. That effort should continue. In addition to these steps, the U.S. should now consider transferring lethal defensive arms to Ukraine so that it can defend itself from outright Russian theft of part of its territory. All of these steps will help us to contain Russian power in Eastern Europe until the Putin generation passes from power in the next decade or so.

Fifth and finally, resistance to Russia must be seen by all of us as a fundamental test of American leadership in the Transatlantic world. We in the West are stronger than Russia. Much of that strength rests not just on our arms but on our values and democratic traditions.

We are in a major contest with Russia over the future of Europe. Many of us thought the struggle for a democratic, peaceful and united Europe had been won a quarter century ago with the fall of communism in the Warsaw Pact countries and the fall of the Soviet Union itself. But Moscow is now contesting that historical achievement. It is seeking to weaken the western democracies and to intimidate its neighbors.

More than anything else, we need to be unified in the West to prevail. That is why it is vital for President Trump to return to an open embrace of our European allies in his trip to Europe next week. His persistent criticism of NATO and his outright ambivalence about the European Union have harmed the credibility of the United States in Europe. They have cast doubt on our seven decades-long strategy to build peace and security in Europe and to stand by our Article V commitment to NATO.

Since World War Two, the American President has been the leader of the West. By denying that Russian actions are a challenge for the future of the western democracies, President Trump has sadly abdicated that role. We can only hope that he will eventually reconsider and provide more powerful leadership in the tradition of all our modern Presidents of both parties from Harry S Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

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In order to meet the challenge of Russia’s assault on our democracies, we need bipartisan unity in the Congress, Presidential leadership in the White House and a concerted effort with our European allies to defend our democracies currently under assault. If we can secure these three things, we can prevail in defeating this pernicious threat from Moscow.