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U.S. Lawmakers Push for More Sanctions on 'Menace' Russia

By Reuters

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Senator Bob Menendez (Aaron Bernstein / Reuters)

U.S. lawmakers pushed for more aggressive steps to counteract the Russian "menace" on Tuesday, despite Trump administration officials insisting current sanctions were having an effect and vowing to impose more economic pain if Moscow does not change its behavior.

President Donald Trump has repeatedly said he would like better ties with Moscow, but although he met Russian President Vladimir Putin last month, relations between the two countries have been further strained.

Members of Congress, where both chambers are controlled by Trump's fellow Republicans, have called for more action, including introducing new sanctions legislation "from hell," to punish Russia for its annexation of Crimea, involvement in Syria's civil war and cyber attacks seeking to influence U.S. elections.

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They held three hearings related to Russia on Tuesday, in the Banking and Foreign Relations committees and a Judiciary counter-terrorism subcommittee. Lawmakers chastised administration officials for doing too little to change Russian behavior.

Both Republicans and Democrats have criticized Trump, particularly after his Helsinki summit with Putin last month, for failing to stand up to Moscow and not fully enacting a sweeping sanctions law passed nearly unanimously a year ago.

"It's not often that Congress acts together in such a strong manner," said Republican Senator Mike Crapo, chairman of the Banking Committee, which oversees sanctions policy. "... But then, Russia is a menace on so many different levels, today, that Congress can be compelled to act with a single voice."

Senator Bob Menendez noted that the administration has not designated any new oligarchs for sanctions since April and has eased some sanctions.

"We're told to judge the administration by its actions and not the president's words, but these actions seem to be more aligned with the president's accommodating and disturbing rhetoric than a tougher approach to the Kremlin," Menendez said at the banking hearing.

Menendez vowed that Congress will act, with or without the administration.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell told reporters later Tuesday there was strong interest in legislation to punish Moscow, although he said chances were "probably pretty slim" such a measure would come up for a vote before the Nov. 6 congressional elections.

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