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Washington Pushes for More Sanctions on Russian Businessman

Rep. Bill Keating also alleges Russia is actively spreading disinformation about Covid-19



Rep. Bill Keating, D-Mass., above, organized the effort in the U.S. House of Representatives urging the European Union to sanction Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin.

PHOTO: TOM WILLIAMS/CQ ROLL CALL/NEWSCOM/ZUMA PRESS

By Mengqi Sun

March 25, 2020 8:06 pm ET

Eleven members of the U.S. House of Representatives have urged the European Union to impose sanctions on Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, the latest attempt by lawmakers to combat alleged election meddling by the Kremlin in the U.S. and allied countries as well as possible disinformation about the coronavirus pandemic.

In a letter to the EU's ambassador to the U.S. sent Tuesday, the bipartisan group of lawmakers said Mr. Prigozhin has been serving as an agent for the Kremlin acting primarily through the Wagner Group, a Russian security company, and Internet Research Agency LLC.

Mr. Prigozhin and IRA were indicted in 2018 on charges of engaging in a widespread effort to interfere in the 2016 presidential election as part of special counsel Robert Mueller's

investigation.

Tuesday's letter follows a similar plea earlier this month by five Democratic U.S. senators who sent a letter to the EU's ambassador, Stavros Lambrinidis, urging the bloc to impose economic pressure on Mr. Prigozhin and the Wagner Group over concerns of potential foreign interference as the U.S. presidential election nears.

Rep. Bill Keating (D., Mass.), chairman of the House foreign affairs subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, energy and the environment, organized Tuesday's letter. He alleged in a statement that Russia is spreading disinformation about Covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, to "fuel distrust in the West," in addition to meddling in the 2020 U.S. elections.

"The Russians are using this as a manner of stirring up discord socially," Rep. Keating said in an interview with The Wall Street Journal, citing reports about alleged disinformation related to the pandemic published by the EU's East StratCom Task Force that focuses on addressing Russia's disinformation campaigns.

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U.S. lawmakers have said Mr. Prigozhin and entities associated with him, including the Wagner Group and IRA, are at the center of the alleged interference.

Efforts to reach Mr. Prigozhin, the Wagner Group and IRA for comment weren't successful.

Lawyers that have represented Concord Management and Consulting LLC, another entity the U.S. Treasury Department has said is controlled by Mr. Prigozhin and provided funding to IRA, didn't respond to a request for comment.

The Kremlin and Mr. Prigozhin have previously denied the allegations and a spokesman for Mr. Prigozhin has said the businessman has no relationship to the Wagner Group.

"Trying to score political points by Russophobia and attributing fake news about Covid-19 to Russia is doubly cynical," the Russian embassy in Washington said in a statement. "We urge American politicians to exercise common sense and join forces in the fight against a common misfortune—the coronavirus pandemic. Sowing discord, panic and xenophobia means helping the disease to spread."

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The U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on the Wagner Group in 2017, alleging it recruited mercenaries to fight alongside separatists in eastern Ukraine.

In 2018, the Treasury Department blacklisted Mr. Prigozhin for alleged involvement with interfering with the 2016 elections and for allegedly financing IRA. The department alleged that St. Petersburg-based IRA tampered with or altered information to meddle in the 2016 U.S. elections.

Mr. Prigozhin's "track record as an agent of malign Russian influence around the world cannot go unanswered," the letter sent by the House members said.

The Delegation of the EU to the U.S. didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

An EU official previously said the bloc's sanctions measures are decided unanimously by the European Council, which is made up of leaders of all member states. "Any decision to impose restrictive measures on individuals, entities or groups is for the Council to take," the official said.

Rep. Keating acknowledged that the EU has a hard road in getting every member country to agree to levy sanctions, adding that "The message is not only to the EU; the message is to Prigozhin himself."

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