



March 10, 2020

Dear Attorney General Barr,

According to a [story](#) published in today's *New York Times*, "Russia Trying to Stoke U.S. Racial Tensions Before Election, Officials Say," Russia is aiming to influence the 2020 presidential election by inciting violence and spreading hate messages through direct funding of white supremacist groups. The article stated: "Russia's lead intelligence agency, the S.V.R., has apparently gone beyond 2016 methods of interference, when operatives tried to stoke racial animosity by creating fake Black Lives Matter groups and spreading disinformation to depress black voter turnout. Now, Russia is also trying to influence white supremacist groups, the officials said; they gave few details, but one official said federal investigators are examining how at least one neo-Nazi organization with ties to Russia is funded." These deeply troubling efforts by Russia to fund and support white supremacist organizations in America must be aggressively investigated and prevented.

On behalf of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a coalition of more than 200 national organizations committed to promoting and protecting the civil and human rights of all persons in the United States, and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., we wish to be informed about the steps the U.S. Department of Justice has undertaken, or intends to undertake, to address the Russian government's ongoing efforts to manipulate the 2020 U.S. presidential election by inciting racial violence, hatred, and division. We regard this as a matter of the highest priority for the integrity of our elections and for the safety and protection of African Americans and other minority groups who may be targeted as a result of these Russian efforts.

The *New York Times* article also indicated that Russia continues to attempt manipulation of the 2020 presidential election through social media efforts that are more difficult to detect. The article stated: "Rather than disseminate messages as widely as possible, as in 2016, Russian operatives are using private Facebook groups, posts on the online message board 4chan and closed chat rooms that are more difficult to monitor, according to intelligence officials." Attempts to exploit social media platforms in the 2016 election were documented by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, the Senate Intelligence Committee, and other reports, and it appears that such efforts continue albeit in different guises. These efforts represent a perilous attempt by a foreign power to exploit racial tensions in the United States and suppress voter turnout by communities of color, particularly African Americans, in the upcoming presidential election. These troubling revelations should be of the gravest concern to anyone who cares about the integrity of our elections and the health of our democracy.

Russian efforts at election interference exacerbate voter suppression efforts that have emerged domestically in the wake of the Supreme Court's infamous *Shelby County v. Holder* decision, which severely weakened the Voting Rights Act and has led to a resurgence of voter suppression laws and policies across the nation since the Court's 2013 decision. [Over the past decade, 25 states have created new barriers to the ballot box](#) that disproportionately disenfranchise voters of color. It is shameful that the Department of Justice under this administration has not brought a single case under the Voting Rights Act to combat these efforts.

As the guardian and enforcer of our federal civil rights laws, the U.S. Department of Justice must take immediate steps to combat voter suppression tactics from both foreign and domestic powers. The vast resources of your office and the unique civil rights and investigatory expertise in the Department must be marshalled to address this urgent challenge. Your law enforcement obligations include the critical necessity of enforcing the nation's civil rights laws and protecting the populace against actors – foreign and domestic – who seek to interfere with the voting rights of racial minorities, stoke racial division, and incite racial violence and intimidation.

As Attorney General, your voice should be clear and unequivocal in stating your opposition to these foreign efforts, and in committing the resources of your office to investigating, prosecuting, and protecting against any plan by foreign actors or domestic white supremacist groups to exploit or increase racial divisions that would undermine the right of African Americans to participate fully in the democratic process.

Thus we ask that you please advise us on efforts the Justice Department is undertaking to: (1) investigate the issues raised in today's *New York Times*, (2) prohibit voter suppression efforts by state and local governments, including through the use of its remaining authority under the Voting Rights Act, and (3) support executive actions to combat voter suppression and promote election security, and support federal legislation such as the Stopping Harmful Interference in Elections for a Lasting Democracy ("SHIELD") Act that would prohibit the exchange of campaign information between candidates and foreign governments, create a duty to report to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Federal Election Commission offers of assistance from foreign governments and their agents, prohibit deceptive practices and false information about voting procedures, and require transparency for online political advertisements.

We now know that Black American voters must contend with both overwhelming domestic suppression efforts and foreign interference on a massive scale. These threats are not separate phenomena. They are closely related attempts to use race and racism in America to divide the electorate and subjugate Americans of color. We urge you to take the steps necessary to protect voting rights from the many assaults it now faces.

Sincerely,



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