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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 001386

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SUBJECT: BERLUSCONI'S COMMENTS ON MISSILE DEFENSE AND

KOSOVO CREATE FIRESTORM IN ITALY

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Classified By: Barbara A. Leaf, Acting Deputy Chief of Mission, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) During a press conference on the margins of the Italy-Turkey summit in Izmir on November 12, Italian PM Berlusconi said that the U.S. had "provoked" Russia by unilaterally recognizing Kosovo's independence, pressing forward on Missile Defense, and inviting Ukraine and Georgia to have a closer relationship with NATO. While Berlusconi's latest comments are a culmination of a string of inflammatory and unhelpful comments in support of Putin that began shortly after Berlusconi took office this year, these latest statements went considerably

further in attempting to place the blame for Russia's paranoia on the U.S. Additionally, Berlusconi appears to be encouraging his own government and Russia to disregard the current administration and lobby the incoming U.S. President to take a softer line on Russia. At the same time, he has attempted to portray himself as the primary interlocutor between Putin and the West, and particularly with the U.S. As a result of Berlusconi's latest comments, post reached out to interlocutors at all levels to register our dismay at the latest barrage of Berlusconiisms. Our contacts universally responded with a combination of dismay, dismissal or shoulder-shrugging. In an effort at damage-control, FM Frattini dispatched a senior MFA official the following morning to see the A/DCM and 'clarify' the GOI,s stance. Instead, he took back a terse message to the FM that such comments risk substantial and lasting damage to Italy,s credibility in Washington. End summary.

¶2. (C) During a press conference with Turkish PM Erdogan on November 12 in Izmir, PM Berlusconi said the U.S. had "provoked" Russia by unilaterally recognizing Kosovo's independence, pressing forward with Missile Defense and encouraging Ukraine and Georgia to have a closer relationship with NATO. Berlusconi's latest comments represent a continuation of a long campaign of support for Putin since the Italian PM returned to power this year. In addition to his latest comments, Berlusconi has supported Russian initiatives to create a new security architecture in Europe to supersede NATO and OSCE, has insisted that Putin acted appropriately during the Georgia-Russia conflict, and has opposed NATO expansion on the basis that it presents a threat to Russia. He has even called for Russia to be a full member of the EU - a comment he made at a time when the EU was considering whether to continue business as usual with Russia in the aftermath of the Georgia-Russia conflict.

¶3. (C) Most disturbingly, Berlusconi has attempted to portray himself to Russia and the EU as the principal interlocutor between the transatlantic community, and in particular the U.S., and Russia. He has repeatedly called on the U.S. to take a softer line with Russia on virtually all democratic and security issues and has even called on his government and Russia to look beyond the current administration to the incoming U.S. President in order to achieve these goals.

¶4. (C) Following this latest set of remarks, we reached out to virtually every senior interlocutor on Russia within the GOI and in Berlusconi,s own center-right coalition. The Ambassador called DPM Letta. A/DCM called FM Frattini's chief of staff, the MFA Director General for Europe, the National Security Advisor, and a member of parliament from Berlusconi's party. Poloff reached out to the Acting Director of the MFA Russia Office, the Director of the Security Planning Department, the diplomatic advisors to Berlusconi, and members of Berlusconi's party. We expressed our concern that Berlusconi's attempts at 'creating dialogue' with Russia were, in fact, creating greater tension and undermining common efforts to bring stability to the Balkans, and portraying the successful and peaceful expansion of the Euro-Atlantic space as a threat to Russia. In an apparent effort at damage-control, FM Frattini sent a senior member of his staff, Policy Planning Director Maurizio Massari, the day after Berlusconi,s remarks to call on A/DCM to 'clarify' GOI policy.

¶5. (C) Massari (as did virtually all of our interlocutors) told A/DCM that the PM was accustomed to making off-the-cuff remarks that should not be interpreted as policy statements per se. Massari said that Frattini was urging the U.S. to

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look to Italy's strong bilateral cooperation rather than Berlusconi's comments as an indication of the strength of the relationship and the direction of

Italian policy. Italy's foreign policy remained strongly Atlanticist; Berlusconi, according to Massari, had meant to be constructive and wanted to take a positive role in creating understanding between its key strategic partners, the U.S. and Russia. The comments had not been meant to criticize the U.S.

¶6. (C) A/DCM countered that the PM's statements risked damaging to our efforts to bring stability to the Balkans by calling into question the basis for Kosovo's independence - a process that Italy had been a part of from the beginning. Additionally, Berlusconi's comments ran headlong into sensitive negotiations with Russia on confidence building measures, as well as Czech and Polish internal deliberations on ratification of Missile Defense. By characterizing Ukrainian and Georgian NATO aspirations as inherently threatening to Russia, Berlusconi was casting doubt on a process which had produced significant reforms in aspirant countries that are looking to join the community of democratic nations.

¶7. (C) A/DCM told Massari that the GOI gave every appearance that the U.S. was experiencing a power vacuum. The current administration was still in charge, and the incoming one had made that abundantly clear. By encouraging his own government and Russia to speak past the current administration and offer 'advice' to the President-Elect, Berlusconi was losing credibility for Italy as a reliable partner, which he could ill afford to do, given the challenges ahead of us in Afghanistan and elsewhere. A/DCM added that the new administration would conduct its own diplomacy and would not need Berlusconi as 'a bridge' to engage in a dialogue with Russia on either a bilateral or multilateral basis.

¶8. (C) Massari, in obvious discomfort, said he 'fully understood' the U.S. perspective on Berlusconi's recent stream of commentary, said he would take this message back to FM Frattini in detail. He also asked for our thoughts on how to avoid any further 'misunderstandings' of this nature. He said he would recommend that the FM make a statement clarifying Italy's support for Kosovo and NATO expansion. He also said he would advise the FM to talk to Berlusconi about the degree to which his comments on the US/Russia relationship, Georgia, MD and other issues had irritated Washington. A/DCM ended the conversation by suggesting that PM refrain from making any further offers to guide the new U.S. administration in its relationship with Russia.

¶9. (C) Comment. All of our interlocutors were at visible pains to underscore that they understood the PM's comments in Izmir had crossed the line. All, however, particularly party officials, reiterated that Berlusconi does not listen to the advice of his own experts in crafting his approach with other states. On Russia, Berlusconi takes this to an extreme, not only conducting his own brand of foreign policy, but on a tactical basis, as a way of gaining favor with his Russian interlocutors - with whom many (including his own party officials) suspect he has a personally and financially enriching relationship. All of our contacts stated that it might be difficult to reign him in and, somewhat fatalistically, encouraged us to ignore his comments. One senior MFA official went so far as to suggest Ambassador take up the issue directly with Berlusconi and asked us to let her know what Berlusconi offered as his justification for his remarks, since, she said, she had no insight whatsoever as to what had animated his remarks on Kosovo and MD.

¶10. (C) It will be all the more important that Berlusconi and his advisors hear a similarly blunt warning about the direction of Italy,s Russia policy during in any bilats or pull-asides on the margins of the upcoming G-20 summit. SPOGLI