

POLITICS

Sondland Criticizes Trump Over Efforts to Pressure Ukraine

U.S. ambassador to the European Union says he was 'disappointed' by president's directive to work with Giuliani



Gordon Sondland, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union, appeared Thursday before Congress for a closed deposition on the Ukraine scandal. PHOTO: OLIVIER DOULIERY/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Rebecca Ballhaus

Updated Oct. 17, 2019 6:16 pm ET

WASHINGTON— Gordon Sondland, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union, criticized President Trump over his efforts to enlist Ukraine in investigating a political rival and said he and other U.S. officials were disappointed by the president's directive to work with Rudy Giuliani on Ukraine matters.

Mr. Sondland made the comments in prepared testimony to House committees as part of their impeachment inquiry, which is examining the president, his personal lawyer Mr. Giuliani and top diplomats' dealings with Ukraine.

Democrats have accused the president of abusing the power of his office to pressure a foreign country to pursue investigations that could benefit his re-election campaign. Mr. Trump has dismissed the inquiry as a hoax and denies wrongdoing.

The testimony Thursday, as with other recent witnesses, took place in a closed session, for roughly nine hours. The Wall Street Journal viewed a copy of Mr. Sondland’s opening statement to the committees.

[Read Mr. Sondland’s opening statement here.]

Mr. Sondland’s prepared testimony includes criticism of the president and his handling of U.S. foreign policy toward Ukraine on a number of fronts, including Mr. Trump’s request in a July phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that Ukraine investigate Joe Biden and the president’s decision to withhold nearly \$400 million in aid to Ukraine about a week before that call. He said he regretted the departure of Marie Yovanovitch, whom Mr. Trump this spring ousted as ambassador to Ukraine after Mr. Giuliani raised concerns about her. Mr. Sondland described her as an “excellent diplomat” and a “delight to work with.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How do you think Sondland’s testimony will impact President Trump’s impeachment inquiry, if at all? Join the conversation below.

“Inviting a foreign government to undertake investigations for the purpose of influencing an upcoming U.S. election would be wrong. Withholding foreign aid in order to pressure a foreign government to take such steps would be wrong,” Mr. Sondland said in his prepared testimony. “I did not and would not ever participate in such undertakings. In my opinion, security aid to Ukraine was in our vital national

interest and should not have been delayed for any reason.”

At a May White House meeting that followed the U.S. delegation’s trip to Ukraine for the inauguration of Mr. Zelensky, Mr. Trump expressed skepticism that Ukraine was “serious about reforms and anticorruption” and directed those present—including Mr. Sondland, Energy Secretary Rick Perry and Sen. Ron Johnson (R., Wis.)—to talk to Mr. Giuliani about his concern, Mr. Sondland said.

“It was apparent to all of us that the key to changing the president’s mind on Ukraine was Mr. Giuliani,” Mr. Sondland told House committees.

“Our view was that the men and women of the State Department, not the president’s personal lawyer, should take responsibility for all aspects of U.S. foreign policy towards Ukraine,” Mr. Sondland said.

U.S. officials, including then-special representative for Ukraine negotiations Kurt Volker, pursued Mr. Giuliani after the meeting rather than abandoning their goal of arranging a White House meeting with Mr. Zelensky, which Mr. Sondland and others viewed as crucial to U.S. foreign policy goals in the region. Mr. Perry said he called Mr. Giuliani soon after that meeting to seek to

Trump and Ukraine: A Guide to the Key Players



VALENTYN OGIRENKO/REUTERS

resolve his concerns.

But Mr. Sondland said Thursday he didn't understand until months later that Mr. Giuliani was working to push Ukraine to investigate Mr. Biden and his son Hunter Biden, even though Mr. Giuliani this spring repeatedly called for investigations into Mr. Biden on Twitter and in TV interviews. He also said he didn't learn until the White House released a rough transcript of the president's call with Mr. Zelensky last month that Mr. Trump had

asked his Ukrainian counterpart to investigate the Bidens.

Mr. Sondland said that in late July he exchanged emails with Mr. Volker and Bill Taylor, the top U.S. diplomat in Kyiv, in which "we all agreed that President Zelensky should have no involvement in 2020 U.S. presidential election politics." Mr. Sondland didn't give context for those emails.

PREVIOUS COVERAGE

- [Former Russia Adviser Says She Was Alarmed About Ukraine Pressure \(Oct. 14, 2019\)](#)
 - [Trump Pressed for Ukraine Envoy's Removal, She Says \(Oct. 11, 2019\)](#)
 - [White House Shifted Authority Over Ukraine Aid Amid Legal Concerns \(Oct. 10, 2019\)](#)
 - [Texts Indicate White House Used Meeting to Pressure Ukraine on Biden \(Oct. 4, 2019\)](#)
 - [Ukraine Officials Sweated White House Pressure \(Oct. 4, 2019\)](#)
 - [Ukraine Ambassador Was Removed After Giuliani Complained \(Oct. 3, 2019\)](#)
-

Mr. Sondland also shed light on another key moment: a September conversation he had with the president after Mr. Taylor raised concerns that the hold on aid to Ukraine was linked to the investigations the president wanted. The concerns from Mr. Taylor were detailed in a series of

text messages provided by Mr. Taylor earlier this month.

In his testimony, Mr. Sondland said he asked Mr. Trump, "What do you want from Ukraine?" The president responded: "Nothing. There is no quid pro quo." Mr. Trump, who appeared to be in a bad mood, repeated "no quid pro quo" multiple times, Mr. Sondland said. He also said he couldn't independently verify the president's assurance since he wasn't involved in the hold on aid.

Mr. Taylor will appear before the committees on Tuesday, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Mr. Sondland also said Thursday that while Mr. Giuliani in an August conversation brought up Burisma Holdings—a Ukrainian gas company whose board Hunter Biden once sat on—Mr. Sondland at the time didn't understand the company to be connected to the Bidens. Instead, he said, he believed the company to be “one of many examples of Ukrainian companies run by oligarchs and lacking the type of corporate governance structures found in Western companies.”

Democrats who sat in on the testimony had mixed views.

“Some of the testimony he provided was not credible to me—with respect to his not understanding all the things that were happening around him and in full view of the American people,” said Rep. David Cicilline (D., R.I.).

Rep. Dina Titus (D., Nev.) said: “Some people thought he might have his own prejudices coming in to protect the president, but he's being pretty forthcoming.”

Mr. Giuliani raised Burisma with Mr. Sondland while telling the ambassador that Mr. Trump wanted Mr. Zelensky to issue a public statement committing Ukraine to investigate corruption issues, including the 2016 election and Burisma Holdings, Mr. Sondland said. Mr. Sondland and Mr. Volker had been working with Ukrainian officials on the draft of the statement, which Ukraine ultimately opted not to issue.

Hunter Biden served on the board of Burisma Holdings while his father oversaw U.S. policy on Ukraine as vice president. Both have denied wrongdoing.

Mr. Sondland's testimony came amid fast-moving developments around Washington involving the impeachment inquiry. Testimony scheduled for Friday from Laura Cooper, the deputy assistant secretary of defense, was postponed until next Thursday, according to an official working on the impeachment inquiry.

Ms. Cooper is expected to know about discussions between the Pentagon and the White House concerning the decision to withhold aid to Ukraine this summer, an area of interest to Democrats in part because the White House gave a politically appointed official the authority to keep aid to Ukraine on hold after career budget staff members questioned the legality of delaying the funds, the Journal has reported.

—*Siobhan Hughes and Jesse Naranjo contributed to this article.*

Write to Rebecca Ballhaus at Rebecca.Ballhaus@wsj.com

THE UKRAINE WITNESSES

- Oct. 3: Kurt Volker, former U.S. special representative for Ukraine negotiations, **testifies and hands over text** messages with other State Department officials that showed officials attempting to use a potential meeting between Mr. Trump and his Ukrainian counterpart as leverage to press Kyiv to investigate Joe Biden.
 - Oct. 11: Marie Yovanovitch, former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, **testifies that Mr. Trump sought** for over a year to remove her and that his allies, including Mr. Giuliani, targeted her in a “concerted campaign.”
 - Oct. 14: Fiona Hill, President Trump’s former top Russia adviser, **testifies that she and other White House** officials grew so alarmed by the administration’s efforts to push Ukraine to open certain investigations that they raised objections with a White House lawyer.
 - Oct. 15: George Kent, deputy assistant secretary of state, **gives testimony that supports the findings** in the August whistleblower complaint that sparked the impeachment inquiry, a Democratic lawmaker says.
 - Oct. 16: Michael McKinley, former top aide to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, **testifies that he left his post** over frustration with Mr. Pompeo regarding the treatment of Ms. Yovanovitch.
 - Oct. 17: Gordon Sondland, U.S. ambassador to the European Union, criticized President Trump over his efforts to enlist Ukraine in investigating a political rival and said he and other U.S. officials were “disappointed” by the president’s directive to work with Rudy Giuliani on Ukraine matters.
-