

POLITICS

Delay in Military Aid for Ukraine Stymied Lawmakers for Weeks

Trump's pressure campaign on the country puts new emphasis on money to help it ward off Russia



Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell responds to questions from the news media earlier this month. PHOTO: SHAWN THEW/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Siobhan Hughes

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WASHINGTON—For weeks, lawmakers of both parties struggled to get answers over why the Trump administration delayed money Congress had appropriated to help Ukraine defend itself from the threat of Russian aggression.

The story of how Congress was left largely in the dark—and how it intervened to get the military aid back on track—has become another focal point amid news of a pressure campaign aimed at the Ukrainian government by President Trump and his personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani. On Monday, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) called on Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) to launch a broad investigation touching on who directed the suspension of aid, saying it should be part of a broader probe.

The Wall Street Journal reported last week that Mr. Trump in a July phone call repeatedly pressed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate Joe Biden's anticorruption efforts in the country while he was vice president and while his son Hunter Biden was working

there. Neither Biden has been accused of wrongdoing over their work in Ukraine. Democrats have said the president was wrongfully pressuring a foreign leader to investigate a potential 2020 opponent, and part of a whistleblower complaint concerning Mr. Trump involves the Ukraine call, according to a person familiar with the matter.

That July conversation wasn't known to lawmakers trying to get to the bottom of Mr. Trump's opposition to a Ukraine aid package. As lawmakers lobbied Mr. Trump to release the money personally and called officials across his administration, they kept getting shifting responses, according to multiple interviews over the past few weeks.

"It's not uncommon for foreign aid to be somewhat conditional; we don't just give aid away under any and all circumstances," said Steven Smith, a political-science professor at Washington University in St. Louis. But "if the money then is somehow withheld and [lawmakers aren't] privy to the reason for it, then it's a pretty serious situation."

The Trump administration said that with the Ukraine money, it sought to more closely scrutinize how it was going to be used. The administration has sought to restrict foreign-aid disbursements several times, repeatedly drawing the ire of lawmakers who have insisted on the importance of the funds.

"That good-government process was run by the President's policy team on this account to ensure that those goals were met," a senior administration official said.

Politico reported on Aug. 28 that Mr. Trump had asked his national security team to review the \$250 million in aid, which had been appropriated as part of the fiscal 2019 spending package.

Over a congressional recess, while the country was focused on mass shootings in Texas and Ohio, a handful of lawmakers engaged in a campaign to release the military aid.

Sen. Chris Murphy (D., Conn.) wrote that cutting off aid would be "an absolute gift" to the Russians, and he traveled to Ukraine earlier this month to talk with Ukraine's president and other government officials there. The co-chairs of the House Ukraine Caucus issued a statement saying the aid shouldn't be delayed. On Sept. 3, Sens. Jeanne Shaheen (D., N.H.), Rob Portman (R., Ohio), Ron Johnson (R., Wis.), Dick Durbin (D., Ill.) and Richard Blumenthal (D., Conn.) wrote to acting White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney and the Office of Management and Budget and pointedly underscored their congressional prerogatives.

"This funding is crucial to the long term stability of Ukraine and has the continued backing and approval of the U.S. Congress which appropriated these funds," they wrote. "We strongly urge you to direct the Department of Defense to obligate these funds immediately," they said.

"We got nowhere," Ms. Shaheen later said.

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Part of the complication was that lawmakers couldn't get clear answers from the administration on its rationale for holding up the military aid, making it nearly impossible to work through issues.

When some lawmakers spoke with Mr. Trump, the president told them that he was upset that other countries weren't spending enough to bolster Ukraine, according to a person familiar with the matter.

That was the same explanation Mr. Trump gave to reporters on Sunday, when asked about Ukraine: "Germany should be spending much more, France, all of the European Union should be spending money. Why are we spending money and they're not?"

But on Sept. 3, Vice President Mike Pence suggested the delay in aid was about corruption, saying he had brought up that concern a day earlier in his own meeting with Mr. Zelensky.

Mr. Pence said that "to invest additional taxpayer [money] in Ukraine, the president wants to be assured that those resources are truly making their way to the kind of investments that will contribute to security and stability in Ukraine."

Military officials seemed less wary, lawmakers said.

"We were repeatedly promised by the military leaders when we pushed that the money was going to be released," said Mr. Blumenthal, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "We were assured repeatedly that they saw not only the need for it militarily, but also a clear path forward."

Meanwhile, Senate Foreign Relations Committee members were also receiving muddled answers.

“There was a lot of consternation about why this was held up and what was going on,” said Sen. Chris Coons (D., Del.), a member of the panel. “I don’t remember ever hearing a clear response about what the holdup was.”

Sen. John Kennedy (R., La.) tried to find out by asking Mr. Durbin, a co-chair of the Senate’s Ukraine Caucus, and Mr. Murphy why they thought funds had been held up. “We don’t know,” Mr. Durbin said.

Fed up, senators coalesced around an amendment that Mr. Durbin had sought to attach to a fiscal 2020 defense-spending bill to force the release of funds to Ukraine. The day before the Senate Appropriations Committee was scheduled to vote, the White House released the military aid, along with \$142 million in State Department funds.

“Why was it released?” asked Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.) of Mr. Durbin during a committee markup of the spending bill on Sept. 12. “Because of your amendment. That’s why it was released, because I was going to vote for it.”

—*Andrew Duehren contributed to this article.*

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