

# In Months Before Trump Call, Ukraine Officials Sweated White House Pressure

The administration in Kyiv felt it had to accede to White House wishes in order to secure a summit

*By Alan Cullison, Georgi Kantchev, Thomas Grove and James Marson*

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KYIV, Ukraine—Two weeks after national elections in April vaulted him from the role of television comic to Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky got word that President Trump’s personal lawyer wanted to come to Kyiv to talk.

Mr. Zelensky and his advisers, many of whom were ex-producers and screenwriters, huddled over the request. Before his improbable rise, Mr. Zelensky didn’t know who Rudy Giuliani was, according to one aide. By now, though, Mr. Zelensky sensed trouble. In an April 7 appearance on Fox News, the former New York City mayor had made it clear he wanted information about his client’s political rival, Joe Biden, and his family.

Mr. Zelensky, fearful of getting sucked into a foreign drama when he had plenty at home, declined to take the meeting.

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He got sucked in anyway. Over the next several months, Mr. Zelensky’s administration tried to sort through conflicting signals from Washington that have now become central to an impeachment inquiry into Mr. Trump. A summit dangled by the U.S. leader kept receding. At the last minute, it was announced that Energy Secretary Rick Perry would be attending his inauguration instead of

Vice President Mike Pence.

Most worrying, for a country that depends on its strategic alliance with the U.S. to help fend off Russian aggression, the Ukrainians learned long after the fact that Washington had decided to withhold nearly \$400 million in approved military assistance.

“This is a damaging mess for Ukraine,” said Pavlo Klimkin, Ukraine’s foreign minister until the end of August. “It has always been a key point of Ukrainian foreign policy to show we have U.S. support. We can’t afford to lose that.”

This account shows how events looked from the Ukrainian side—in particular how the administration in Kyiv felt under pressure to accede to the White House’s wishes.

It is based on multiple interviews with current and former Ukrainian government officials; consultants close to members of Mr. Zelensky’s inner circle; current and former U.S. diplomats; and internal documents produced in connection with the U.S. congressional impeachment inquiry.



Mr. Trump’s personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, seen here in Manchester, N.H., made clear he wanted information about his client’s political rival, Joe Biden, and his family. PHOTO: JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS

Mr. Zelensky’s difficulties were magnified by his lack of familiarity with U.S. politics. Famous inside Ukraine for his television sitcom role as a history teacher who accidentally becomes president, he was elected by a landslide largely for his distance from a political establishment laboring under a cloud of corruption and self-dealing.

After becoming a front-runner, he took a crash course in civics, getting tutored on the function of institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, one of the country’s biggest backers, one person close to him said.

For years, Mr. Giuliani and others close to Mr. Trump had blamed Ukraine for bad press during the 2016 U.S. election. They accused the previous Ukrainian administration of Petro Poroshenko of spreading allegations of financial crimes by Mr. Trump’s onetime campaign chief, Paul Manafort, when he worked there as a political consultant.

Before the latest election, Mr. Giuliani met with Ukraine's top prosecutor, Yuriy Lutsenko, according to a person familiar with the matter. Mr. Lutsenko told Mr. Giuliani he thought there were unanswered questions about the role of the former vice president's son, Hunter Biden, at Ukrainian gas company Burisma Holdings Ltd., where he had accepted a board seat in 2014, this person said. No allegations of wrongdoing about Hunter Biden have been made public, and Mr. Lutsenko has since said there was no evidence of wrongdoing by Joe Biden or his son.



Mr. Zelensky, seen at his inauguration, was previously famous for his television sitcom role as a history teacher who accidentally becomes president. PHOTO: SERGEY DOLZHENKO/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Messrs. Trump and Giuliani have alleged that the senior Mr. Biden helped lobby for the ouster of a previous Ukrainian prosecutor to protect his son from an investigation. That prosecutor was dismissed by parliament in the face of a broad criticism by Western countries for not being tough enough on corruption. Mr. Biden has called the accusations against him lies and distortions.

After Mr. Zelensky's election on April 21, Mr. Giuliani announced his plans to come to Kyiv, press his investigation and meet the new president.

After the new administration demurred, Mr. Giuliani told Fox News in May that the new president had surrounded himself with "a group of people that are enemies of the president...in some cases enemies of the United States."

Mr. Giuliani took aim in particular at Serhiy Leshchenko, an adviser to Mr. Zelensky who publicized financial documents purported to relate to Mr. Manafort, who was later convicted and jailed for 7½ years on tax and bank fraud, among other crimes. Mr. Leshchenko, a former journalist, said he left Mr. Zelensky's team to reduce the chance of provoking the ire of Mr. Trump and his allies.

After his election, Mr. Zelensky got a congratulatory phone call from Mr. Trump, who made general reference to the need to fight corruption in Ukraine, without mentioning Mr. Biden or Mr. Giuliani, according to people close to the situation.

There were signs of possible displeasure. Mr. Zelensky's team was told Mr. Pence would attend his inauguration. Instead, he got Mr. Perry, a cabinet member relatively low in the pecking order.

At the start of his administration, Mr. Zelensky's administration was eager to clinch a White House summit to show Washington's support. Mr. Zelensky's administration was hoping for a quick turnaround, and aides were aiming for a June or July meeting.

"Zelensky was a bit offended; he was asking, 'Why is it not happening?'" an official close to the situation said.

Before Mr. Zelensky's inauguration in May, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent advised members of the incoming team around the president to avoid making Mr. Giuliani any promises, according to people in the U.S. and Ukraine.

Formal diplomatic channels were soon disrupted. Mr. Trump fired the U.S. ambassador in Kyiv, Marie Yovanovitch, whom Mr. Trump would later call "bad news" in a phone call with the Ukrainian president. Mr. Trump ordered her removal after months of complaints from allies outside the administration, including Mr. Giuliani, that she was undermining him abroad and obstructing efforts to persuade Kyiv to investigate the Bidens, The Wall Street Journal has previously reported.



U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch was pushed out after complaints from Trump allies, including Mr. Giuliani.  
PHOTO: MIKHAIL PALINCHAK/UKRAINIAN PRESIDENCY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ms. Yovanovitch didn't respond to requests for comment. People close to her disputed that she did anything wrong and defended her work.

Kurt Volker, then the U.S. government's special representative to Ukraine, began laying the groundwork for a longer phone call between Messrs. Trump and Zelensky, where it was clear to participants that Mr. Giuliani's investigations would be on the agenda.

After having breakfast with Mr. Giuliani in July, Mr. Volker messaged U.S. Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland, another political appointee under Mr. Trump.

"Most imp't is for Zelensky to say that he will help investigation—and address any specific personnel issues—if there are any," Mr. Volker said in the text, which was released this week by Congressional Democrats.

Unbeknown to Mr. Zelensky's team, a fresh blow had already landed on U.S.-Ukrainian ties. In July, Mr. Trump asked his acting chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney, to place \$391 million in aid to Ukraine on hold.

If Washington intended to deliver a message, it didn't land. Mr. Zelensky had no ambassador in Washington, and other channels of communication had broken down. As they prepared for a promised phone call with Mr. Trump, the Ukrainians were in the dark about one of the most crucial pillars of U.S. support.

On the morning of July 25, hours ahead of the phone call between the U.S. and Ukrainian presidents, Mr. Volker reached out to senior aide Andriy Yermak with advice on how to navigate the call.

"Heard from the White House—assuming President Z convinces Trump he will investigate/"get to the bottom of what happened" in 2016, we will nail down date for visit to Washington," he wrote.

On the Ukrainian side, advisers weighed in on how to handle the U.S. president. One official suggested Mr. Zelensky tell President Trump that he is draining the swamp in Ukraine, a reference to a popular Trump refrain.

The 40-minute conversation ended with Mr. Zelensky mentioning he stayed "at the Trump Tower" and promising President Trump he would look into the Burisma case and talk to Mr. Giuliani.

When the Ukrainian leader hung up the phone, many of those huddled around him were jubilant. One flashed a thumbs up.

"Phone call went well," Mr. Yermak texted Mr. Volker, adding that Mr. Trump had asked Mr. Zelensky to choose dates for a White House visit, according to the messages released by Congress. The Ukrainian side responded with Sept. 20-22.





Andriy Yermak, the Zelensky aide who met Mr. Giuliani in Madrid. PHOTO: NEMESH YANOSH/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Little more than a week later, Kyiv followed up on its promise to meet with Mr.

Giuliani, sending Mr. Yermak, the Zelensky adviser, to Madrid for a meeting. In an interview, Mr. Giuliani described Mr. Yermak as “very receptive” to their conversation. Mr. Yermak told Mr. Giuliani the Ukrainian president didn’t want to get embroiled in U.S. politics, a person familiar with the conversation said.

Days after the Madrid meeting, Mr. Yermak texted Mr. Volker to say that once a date for a Washington summit was set, the Zelensky administration could announce a “vision for the reboot of US-UKRAINE relationship.” That relationship, he wrote, would include “Burisma and election meddling in investigations.”

The two sides couldn’t agree on the language of an announcement. On Aug. 16, Mr. Yermak shared a draft of a statement on those topics with Mr. Volker, according to Mr. Volker’s testimony to the House released this week. The draft didn’t mention Burisma or the 2016 elections. Mr. Giuliani pushed back, and the U.S. side emphasized the need to include those references. Ultimately, Mr. Yermak rejected it, saying Ukraine didn’t want to be seen as intervening in the 2020 U.S. elections.

When news broke that Mr. Trump had blocked hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid for Ukraine, stunned officials in Kyiv frantically called contacts in the State Department and the Pentagon to learn the reason.

Some Ukrainian officials surmised that there may have been a technical budgetary reason for the holdup. Others thought it could be that the U.S. is halting foreign aid in general. And some thought it was a personal decision of Mr. Trump.

The revelations about the July phone call and the release of a rough transcript by the White House caught Mr. Zelensky’s team by surprise. He later said publicly he thought only Mr. Trump’s side of their call would be published.



Vice President Mike Pence, center, and Mr. Zelensky, left. The Ukrainians had expected Mr. Pence to attend the presidential inauguration. PHOTO: UKRAINIAN PRESIDENCY/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Earlier this month, while seated next to Mr. Trump during a press conference, Mr. Zelensky said that he didn't feel pressured by Mr. Trump.

"Only my son, who is 6 years old, can put pressure on me," Mr. Zelensky said.

With Ukraine now thrust firmly into the middle of a partisan fight in Washington, the Ukrainian president and his team are playing for time. Ukraine's prosecutor general announced this week it would look at a number of investigations that had been closed under previous administrations, including 15 connected to the owner of Burisma and others. Mr. Biden wasn't mentioned by name.

The prosecutor stressed that the reviews weren't connected to political pressure and that the move was part of a broader evaluation of what his predecessors had done in the past.

"Now, they are confused, don't want to take sides," said the adviser to Mr. Zelensky's administration. "They are asking everybody what to do."

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