

POLITICS

Giuliani Sits at the Center of the Ukraine Controversy

Ukrainian officials saw him as a direct conduit to Trump; former New York mayor featured in whistleblower complaint



The efforts of former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, left, in Ukraine have been blessed by President Trump. PHOTO: CAROLYN KASTER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Rebecca Ballhaus in Washington, Alan Cullison and Georgi Kantchev in Kyiv and Brett Forrest in New York

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A key figure at the heart of the burgeoning impeachment probe is former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who as personal attorney to President Trump pressed Ukraine on pursuing an investigation of one of his boss' political rivals.

A whistleblower complaint released Thursday depicts Mr. Giuliani, 75 years old, as eager to thrust himself into U.S. foreign policy. In some instances, he acted on his own, and in others his actions were in conjunction with U.S. government officials.

Ukrainians seeking influence in Washington viewed him as a direct conduit to Mr. Trump. And when Mr. Giuliani's actions were in conflict with the U.S. government's national-security and foreign-policy apparatus, it was unable and at times unwilling to deter him. Some senior government officials knew little, if anything, of his work.

“My only knowledge of what Mr. Giuliani does—I have to be honest with you—I get from the TV or the news media,” said Joseph Maguire, acting director of national intelligence, in testifying before the House Intelligence Committee Thursday about the complaint. “I’m not aware of what he does for the president.”

Mr. Giuliani’s efforts, however, were blessed by Mr. Trump. Mr. Giuliani has said several of his dealings with Ukrainian officials were initiated by the State Department. In July, Mr. Giuliani, a former mayor of New York, received a text message from Kurt Volker, the U.S. government’s special representative to Ukraine. In the message, which Mr. Giuliani provided to The Wall Street Journal, Mr. Volker offered to introduce Mr. Giuliani to a senior adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

“Mr. Mayor—really enjoyed breakfast this morning,” Mr. Volker texted to Mr. Giuliani on July 19. “As discussed, connecting you here with Andrey Yermak, who is very close to President Zelensky.” He suggested a three-way call the next week.

After the call, Mr. Yermak—whom Mr. Giuliani has said he urged to have the Ukrainian government pursue an investigation into Joe Biden —told Mr. Giuliani he was “sure things will move quickly from today onwards and we will be able to take this relationship to a new level,” according to a text message viewed by the Journal.

Mr. Volker, a former U.S. ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, has served as an unpaid volunteer in the Ukraine post since 2017. He couldn’t be reached for comment.

A State Department spokesman confirmed that Mr. Volker, at Mr. Yermak’s request, put Mr. Yermak in touch with Mr. Giuliani. “Mr. Giuliani is a private citizen and acts in a personal capacity as a lawyer for President Trump,” the spokesman said. “He does not speak on behalf of the U.S. Government.”

Six days after the text, Mr. Trump in a phone call pressed Mr. Zelensky to pursue investigations, including a probe into the activities of Mr. Biden, the former vice president and current Democratic presidential candidate. During the call, Mr. Trump repeatedly said Mr. Zelensky should connect with Mr. Giuliani and Attorney General William Barr, according to a record of the call released by the White House Wednesday. Mr. Trump has defended the phone call as “perfect.”

Shortly after the July 25 call, Mr. Giuliani and Mr. Yermak met in person in Madrid. In an interview Thursday, Mr. Giuliani said that he subsequently briefed the State Department and that Mr. Volker texted him: “Thank you very much for your help.”

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Mr. Trump has characterized the impeachment probe as a “witch hunt” by his enemies in Washington.

Mr. Yermak declined to comment through an intermediary.

In Ukraine, Mr. Giuliani is viewed as something of a celebrity. “Giuliani has long been seen as an extension of Trump, some mythical link to the U.S.,” said Nickolay Kapitonenko, an adviser to the Ukrainian Parliament’s Foreign Policy Committee. “So many officials think that contact or even a picture with Giuliani might be helpful for their careers. I’m not sure that’s the case but that’s the perception.”

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In Washington, officials took a less rosy view of the president’s lawyer. Months earlier, in mid-May, multiple U.S. officials told the whistleblower that they were “deeply concerned” by Mr. Giuliani’s flouting of national-security protocols and that State Department officials including Mr. Volker had talked to Mr. Giuliani to “contain the damage” to U.S. national security, according to the complaint. Those officials also met with Ukrainian officials to help them “understand and respond to” the conflicting messages they were receiving from official U.S. channels and Mr. Giuliani, according to the complaint.

Mr. Giuliani in Thursday's interview called the complaint "really ridiculous" and said he was baffled by the allegation that the State Department was upset with him over his work in Ukraine. "If they were worried about me, they did something very reckless," he said. "They took this crazy maniac who's interfering in foreign politics" and arranged a meeting with a top aide to the Ukrainian president, he said, referring to the text message from Mr. Volker. Mr. Giuliani said he doesn't plan to hire a lawyer.

Mr. Giuliani's involvement in the Ukraine issue and his frequent appearances on cable news have grated on some in the White House, according to aides, who have said privately they feel he has made the situation for the president worse.

At least for now, Mr. Trump remains enamored with Mr. Giuliani, people close to the president said. Mr. Trump has frequently praised his lawyer in public and in private for his loyalty and commitment to uncovering what both men believe is inappropriate behavior by Mr. Biden, who hasn't been accused of wrongdoing. One administration official said it was unlikely that Mr. Trump's allies would even try to convince the president to cut ties with Mr. Giuliani because of the two men's tight bond.

White House aides over the past year have grown accustomed to—if not comfortable with—the close relationship between the two men. Mr. Trump and Mr. Giuliani typically meet at the White House alone, aides say. Their meetings—like many with Mr. Trump's close friends—are rarely on the president's schedule that is circulated among aides.

While serving as the president's lawyer, a role for which he doesn't draw a paycheck, Mr. Giuliani has also drawn scrutiny for his frequent trips abroad, where foreign officials say they have been uncertain whether he is speaking for himself or as a U.S. government representative.

Mr. Giuliani, who said he doesn't have security clearance, has met with foreign leaders including the king of Bahrain. Last year, he wrote to the president of Romania to criticize the country's anticorruption investigations, according to a copy of the letter released by Senate Democrats. His position in the letter is counter to that of the State Department.

Mr. Giuliani said at the time that he was working on behalf of his security company, Giuliani Security & Safety, which had been retained by a security company run by former Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Louis J. Freeh.

Mr. Giuliani's role as Mr. Trump's lawyer, opposition-research investigator and frequent defender on television is the latest incarnation for the former associate attorney general and U.S. attorney who became a global figure as mayor of New York when terrorists attacked the city on Sept. 11, 2001. After that, he threw himself into the world of global consulting, starting a management-consulting firm called Giuliani Partners in 2002.



From left: New York Gov. George Pataki, New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D, N.Y.) tour the site of the World Trade Center collapse on the day after the 9/11 attacks. PHOTO: ROBERT F. BUKATY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In 2008, he sought to re-enter politics with a failed presidential campaign, during which he drew criticism for his business activities, including his efforts on behalf of Mexico City and a state-owned firm in Qatar.



Mr. Giuliani with Vitali Klitschko, a boxer who became mayor of Kyiv. PHOTO: DIMA GAVRYSH/ASSOCIATED PRESS

His work with Ukraine began shortly after folding his campaign, when he announced he would

serve as a strategic adviser to help boxer Vitali Klitschko, known as “Dr. Iron Fist,” root out corruption and win election as the mayor of Kyiv. Mr. Klitschko lost that election but became mayor in 2014 and remains in that post.

After the protests that took place in Kyiv in 2014, Mr. Klitschko negotiated a potential contract for Giuliani Security & Safety to restore order in the city. Mr. Giuliani’s fee, roughly \$300,000, was too steep, and the deal wasn’t completed, according to a person who participated in the talks.

Mr. Giuliani didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment on the scuttled deal.

Mr. Giuliani's political clout in Ukraine became outsized after Mr. Trump's election two years later. Mr. Giuliani had advised the president during the campaign and was floated as a possible nominee for attorney general or secretary of state, but ultimately wasn't tapped for an administration post. In January 2017, Mr. Trump said Mr. Giuliani would serve as an unofficial cybersecurity adviser, "sharing his expertise and insight as a trusted friend."

When Mr. Giuliani returned to Ukraine for more consulting work that year, Ukrainian television broadcasts alternately referred to him as a private person and as Mr. Trump's adviser, a description that opened doors to many leading figures.

In June 2017, Mr. Giuliani visited Kyiv and gave a lecture on corruption and democracy. At an event hosted by the foundation of Ukrainian oligarch Victor Pinchuk, Mr. Giuliani met with then-President Petro Poroshenko and then-Prosecutor General Yuriy Lutsenko, according to the foundation's website.

Later that year, Mr. Giuliani visited Kyiv and the eastern city of Kharkov to hold meetings on behalf of his private security business. In Kharkov, the mayor had a row of girls in traditional Ukrainian dress on the airport tarmac meet him and make a traditional offering of bread and salt.

Mr. Giuliani, who in April 2018 began representing the president in special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election, became a magnet for Ukrainian officials looking to establish connections in Washington.

Mr. Giuliani's investigation of Mr. Biden's son, Hunter, began in earnest earlier this year, after Mr. Lutsenko visited Mr. Giuliani's office in New York, according to a person familiar with the matter. Western officials, including the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, had criticized Mr. Lutsenko's office for being sluggish on reforms.

Mr. Lutsenko told Mr. Giuliani that he thought there were unanswered questions about the role of the younger Biden at Burisma Holdings Ltd., where he had accepted a board seat in 2014. Vice President Biden's portfolio at the time included pressuring Ukraine to do more to combat corruption.

Messrs. Giuliani and Lutsenko continued their conversation in a nearby bar over whiskey and cigars, the person familiar with the matter said. And the two men met again the next month in Warsaw.

Mr. Giuliani didn't respond to a request for comment on the meeting, and Mr. Lutsenko declined to comment.

Mr. Giuliani's desire for a Biden investigation, however, soon ran into a perceived obstacle, according to people familiar with the matter—the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch.



Marie Yovanovitch was U.S. ambassador to Ukraine before she was recalled to Washington earlier this year. PHOTO: HENNADI MINCHENKO/UKRINFORM/ZUMA PRESS

Mr. Giuliani publicly accused her of anti-Trump bias, though he has denied he sought to pressure her ouster, which happened earlier this year when the State Department recalled her to Washington.

In a Fox News interview in May, he expressed relief that “she got fired finally.” In another interview Tuesday on Fox News, he accused her without evidence of being “deeply involved” in a plot by Ukraine to boost Democrats in the 2016 presidential election.

Ms. Yovanovitch, who remains a State Department employee and is a senior State Department fellow at Georgetown University, didn’t respond to a request for comment.

“She was doing everything by the book, everything was blessed by State Department,” said a senior Ukraine government official who interacted with her.

Meanwhile, Mr. Giuliani’s role as an intermediary between the two countries was allegedly causing concern among multiple U.S. officials, according to the whistleblower complaint. U.S. officials told the whistleblower that Ukrainian officials understood that a meeting or call between Mr. Trump and Mr. Zelensky would depend on whether the new Ukrainian president “showed willingness to ‘play ball’” on the matters Mr. Giuliani had raised, according to the complaint. Mr. Giuliani didn’t respond to a request for comment.

In mid-July, a week before his call with Mr. Zelensky, Mr. Trump directed acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney to put a hold on nearly \$400 million in aid to Ukraine. Lower-level officials were told of the decision on July 18, the Journal has reported, one day before Mr. Volker reached out to Mr. Giuliani about meeting with Mr. Yermak. The White House has said the aid was put on hold because the president wanted European countries to contribute more to Ukraine. The aid was released this month.

Mr. Giuliani in television appearances over the summer had repeatedly singled out Ukraine over corruption, putting pressure on Mr. Zelensky's new administration, which won election in April.

In July, Mr. Yermak called Mr. Giuliani to ask him to tone it down, according to a person familiar with the call. Mr. Giuliani in response suggested that Ukraine investigate Hunter Biden's relationship with Burisma, the person said.

In early August, Mr. Giuliani met in Madrid with Mr. Yermak, in the meeting Mr. Volker had helped arrange. U.S. officials described the meeting to the whistleblower as a "direct followup" to Mr. Trump's call with Mr. Zelensky about the "cases" they discussed.

Mr. Giuliani described Mr. Yermak as "very receptive" to their conversation and said he subsequently briefed Mr. Volker on the meeting. A person familiar with the conversation said Mr. Yermak told Mr. Giuliani that the Ukrainian president didn't want to get embroiled in U.S. politics.

Days later, on Aug. 9, Mr. Trump told reporters of Mr. Zelensky: "He's a very reasonable guy."

—*Thomas Grove and Andrew Restuccia contributed to this article.*

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