

POLITICS

State Department Official George Kent Testifies in Impeachment Probe

Kent had raised concerns about efforts by Rudy Giuliani and others to undercut former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine



George Kent arrived Tuesday for closed-door testimony before House committees on Capitol Hill. PHOTO: JIM LO SCALZO/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Dustin Volz, Natalie Andrews and Jesse Naranjo

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House committees on Tuesday questioned Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Kent, the most senior-ranking current member of the Trump administration to give testimony in the impeachment inquiry centered on Ukraine.

Mr. Kent, who arrived at the Capitol on Tuesday morning sporting a bow tie, had previously raised concerns about correspondence he sent to colleagues earlier this year in which he raised concerns about efforts by President Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, and others outside the State Department to undercut Marie Yovanovitch, the former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine.

Mr. Kent told lawmakers he grew concerned that he had been sidelined from a separate process for dealing with Ukraine that took hold within the Trump administration earlier this year and circumvented normal diplomatic channels, a Democratic lawmaker who heard his testimony said.

“Here is a senior State Department official responsible for six countries, one of which is Ukraine, who found himself outside of a parallel process that he felt was undermining 28 years of U.S. policy and promoting the rule of law in Ukraine,” Rep. Gerald Connolly (D., Va.), said of Mr. Kent’s testimony.

Mr. Kent, who didn’t respond to a request for comment, was the latest to testify in the Democratic-led impeachment inquiry focused on Mr. Trump’s July call with his Ukrainian counterpart. In that call, Mr. Trump pressed for investigations into his political rival Joe Biden and his son Hunter. Hunter Biden served on the board of Ukrainian natural-gas company Burisma Holdings Ltd. while his father oversaw U.S. policy on Ukraine as vice president. Both have denied wrongdoing.

Mr. Trump has said there was nothing wrong with what he said on the call and has called the Democratic probe a witch hunt. Mr. Giuliani has said that he worked in conjunction with the State Department and that there was nothing wrong with his efforts to press Ukraine to investigate the Bidens.

Mr. Kent, a career foreign-service official who served in the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv before moving to the State Department in Washington, had been expected to give testimony broadly supportive of Ms. Yovanovitch, with whom he worked closely while stationed in the U.S.

The testimony, as with other recent witnesses, took place in a closed session. Democrats are expected to continue calling additional witnesses throughout the week. Republicans have criticized the proceedings, saying they should be public and that they are a partisan campaign against Mr. Trump.

Mr. Kent was compelled to appear by a congressional subpoena, amid efforts by the State Department to prevent its employees from cooperating with the inquiry.

Rep. Tom Malinowski (D., N.J.), commenting briefly as he re-entered the secure House Intelligence Committee room where Mr. Kent was being questioned, said his testimony had so far supported the findings in the August whistleblower complaint that sparked the impeachment inquiry. Like previous witnesses, Mr. Kent’s appearance was an all-day marathon that Democrats believe will further bolster their impeachment inquiry, which is being jointly pursued by six House committees.

“He was clearly bothered by the role Mr. Giuliani was playing, and the disinformation he was spreading, and the fact that he had the president’s ear, which was negatively affecting our relationship with the new government of Ukraine,” said Mr. Connolly, describing Mr. Kent’s testimony.

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The Democratic leadership has been asking members in battleground districts about possibly holding a vote on beginning an impeachment inquiry, according to aides, addressing GOP criticism that the Democrats had started an inquiry without holding a vote. Asked about holding a vote to authorize an impeachment inquiry, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) said: "I'll be talking about that later today after I meet with my colleagues," and said she would make further comments later Tuesday.

A vote authorizing the impeachment inquiry was taken in the two previous impeachment probes into Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, but is not mandated under the Constitution.

Ms. Yovanovitch, who was recalled from her post in May, testified to the House committees last week that Mr. Trump had pressured the State Department to remove her. She said she didn't know why she was targeted by the president's allies outside the administration, including Mr. Giuliani.

Like Ms. Yovanovitch, Mr. Kent was disliked by Ukrainian officials under the previous Ukraine president who opposed an overhaul of Ukraine's prosecutor's office and who singled out Mr. Kent and the ambassador as overly meddlesome in the government's affairs. For years, the U.S. has been pressing Kyiv to shake up the prosecutor's office, arguing many top officials there use their positions for personal benefit rather than fighting crime.

Before the inauguration of the incoming president of Ukraine earlier this year, Mr. Kent visited Kyiv and counseled members of the incoming presidential administration to be cautious in any meetings with Mr. Giuliani, and not to make him any promises, according to a person familiar with the matter.

On Monday, Fiona Hill, Mr. Trump's former top Russia adviser, told the House committees that she and other White House officials grew so alarmed about the administration's efforts to push Ukraine to open certain investigations that they raised their concerns with White House lawyer John Eisenberg, according to people familiar with the matter. The people said Ms. Hill told lawmakers that former national-security adviser John Bolton had specifically instructed her to talk to the lawyer in the wake of a July 10 meeting with senior Ukrainian officials, in which the U.S. ambassador to the European Union, Gordon Sondland, raised the issue of investigations.

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.

Scheduled to Testify:

- Oct. 16: Michael McKinley, former top aide to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo
 - Oct. 17: Gordon Sondland, U.S. ambassador to the European Union
 - Oct. 18: Laura Cooper, Defense Department official overseeing Ukraine
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Republican lawmakers indicated Tuesday they planned to focus their questioning of Mr. Kent on Hunter Biden’s business dealings in Ukraine. Ukrainian officials have

produced no evidence of wrongdoing by either Biden.

Before heading into hearing Mr. Kent’s testimony, Rep. Lee Zeldin (R., N.Y.) said he planned to ask about Mr. Kent’s interactions with Mykola Zlochevsky, co-founder of Burisma Holdings, and Mr. Kent’s interactions with both Bidens.

Republicans and Democrats alike also said that they would like to hear testimony from Mr. Bolton, who left the administration last month and hasn’t commented on Mr. Trump’s dealings with Ukraine.

Republicans continued to call for the disclosure of the name of the Central Intelligence Agency officer who filed the whistleblower complaint.

“He has a right to protection, that’s what the whistleblower statute says, it doesn’t say anonymity,” said Jim Jordan, (R., Ohio). “And I think when you’re talking about the president of the United States for goodness’ sake, the American people, who we all represent, they have a right to know.”

Federal whistleblower law is designed to provide for anonymity protections for intelligence employees so that they will feel emboldened to speak up about concerns of wrongdoing without fear of retaliation, national-security lawyers said. But enforcing those protections can be

difficult, lawyers said, and relevant protections apply to inspectors general and certain members of Congress and their staff but not to other agency officials or the public.

Last week, lawyers for the whistleblower asked Congress whether their client could submit testimony in writing instead of appearing in person, amid continuing concerns that revealing his identity to lawmakers would lead to its public disclosure and a threat to his personal safety. Mr. Trump has described the whistleblower's actions as treasonous.

Over the weekend, Rep. Adam Schiff (D., Calif.), the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said the panel might not ultimately hear testimony from the whistleblower due to safety concerns. Mr. Schiff said that the rough transcript of the call and whistleblower complaint, in addition to testimony from others, already provided ample evidence to support the impeachment inquiry.

—*Alan Cullison*
in Kyiv, Ukraine, contributed to this article.

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