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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Trump's interest in stirring Ukraine investigations sows confusion in Kiev

By **Anton Troianovski**, **Josh Dawsey** and **Paul Sonne**

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MOSCOW — As President Trump and his inner circle appear increasingly focused on Ukraine as a potential tripwire for Joe Biden and other Democrats, officials about to take power in Kiev are pushing their own message: Leave us out of it.

Supporters of Ukrainian President-elect Volodymyr Zelensky — who is expected to take office in the coming weeks — said in interviews Saturday that they feared they were being pulled into a domestic political conflict in the United States, potentially at Ukraine's expense.

Trump's personal attorney, Rudolph W. Giuliani, said Friday that he was canceling a trip to Ukraine during which he was planning to push for investigations that include Biden's son, Hunter, and his time on the board of a Ukraine gas company.

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Giuliani said he was calling off the trip because there were “enemies” of Trump on the team of Zelensky, a comedian with no previous political experience who toppled President Petro Poroshenko in a runoff election last month.

Zelensky — who played Ukraine’s president on a popular TV show — has pledged to fight corruption and push to end the war against Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. But maintaining a close relationship with Washington is critical.

Many Ukrainian officials see U.S. support as a key deterrent preventing Russian President Vladimir Putin from encroaching further on their territory. Western diplomats in Kiev have voiced concerns that Zelensky, given his lack of political experience, could be outmatched in negotiations with Putin.

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Serhiy Leshchenko, a Ukrainian member of parliament and a prominent Zelensky backer, said Ukraine was being drawn into a “dangerous game.”

A person close to Zelensky, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, said the president-elect's team viewed Trump's interest in the investigations as a domestic U.S. matter and was determined not to let it distract from his agenda.

"This is definitely not our war," the person close to Zelensky said. "We have to stay away from this as much as possible."

The person said Zelensky would rule out using political pressure to lean on Ukrainian law enforcement to achieve any White House aims.

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One investigation that has attracted Trump and Giuliani's interest involves a Ukrainian gas company on whose board Hunter Biden served while his father was vice president. Trump said Friday that it would be "appropriate" for him to talk to Attorney General William P. Barr about opening an investigation over the matter into Joe Biden, the current front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination.

"Certainly it is a very big issue and we'll see what happens," Trump told Politico.

There is no evidence that Biden's conduct as vice president was improper while his son served on the board of a Ukrainian gas company.

Giuliani also has pushed for Ukrainian officials to investigate unproven allegations that the Democratic National Committee worked with the Ukrainian government in 2016 to dig up incriminating information about Paul Manafort, Trump's former campaign chairman. The DNC has denied those allegations.

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In recent days, Giuliani had said he was planning to fly to Ukraine on Sunday and would encourage Ukrainian officials to push those investigations forward.

He told The Washington Post on Friday that he was planning to give a paid speech in Ukraine and had heard from a connection there that he could have a meeting with Zelensky.

“What I'm pushing for — don't let the crooks bury the case for the second time — it's all part of a corrupt arrangement between United States political officials of the Democratic Party and Ukrainian officials to dig up dirt on Republicans,” Giuliani said. “I'm going to make sure that nothing scuttles the investigation that I want.”

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However, Giuliani told Fox News later on Friday that he was canceling his trip to Ukraine because he had learned that Zelensky was surrounded by foes of Trump.

“I’m convinced from what I’ve heard from two very reliable people tonight that the president [Zelensky] is surrounded by people who were enemies of the president [Trump], and people who are — at least [in] one case — clearly corrupt and involved in this scheme,” Giuliani said.

He declined to say whether he was acting at Trump’s request or whether he had briefed the president. He said “most of it” was of his own volition, but that the president wanted to get to the “truth.”

Zelensky has not responded publicly to Giuliani’s statements about a possible visit, and it was not clear whether Giuliani actually had a meeting scheduled with the president-elect. The person close to Zelensky said there had been no meeting request from Giuliani via official channels.

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“Neither Volodymyr nor those around him are enemies of America or its president. Definitely, not a single one of them is,” the person close to Zelensky said. “We don’t want everything to be boiled down to such accusations.”

Zelensky has referred to Prosecutor General Yuri Lutsenko — who spoke to The Hill newspaper this year about alleged wrongdoing by the Bidens — as a member of the “old team” whom he plans to replace.

Some of Zelensky’s supporters say Ukrainian officials allied with Poroshenko are now trying to secure their jobs by currying favor with the Trump administration.

“He is pulling Ukraine into this dangerous game in order to save his post,” Leshchenko, the Ukrainian member of parliament and a Zelensky supporter, said of Lutsenko. “He is pulling Ukraine into a front of a domestic political war in America.”

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A spokeswoman for Lutsenko said the prosecutor had nothing to do with Giuliani's potential visit to Ukraine and had no further comment. A spokesman for Biden's campaign declined to comment.

As vice president, Joe Biden became the face of U.S. policy toward Ukraine after its pro-Western uprising in 2014.

At the same time, Hunter Biden joined the board of a little-known Ukrainian gas company owned by a business tycoon and former government minister, Mykola Zlochevsky. The tycoon was facing the prospect of prosecution alongside other former officials from the toppled pro-Moscow government of Viktor Yanukovich.

Zlochevsky had twice served in Ukrainian government positions that influenced the issuing of natural gas production and exploration licenses. The company he would ultimately own won licenses and expanded to become one of the biggest gas producers in the nation. Zlochevsky, through spokespeople, has denied any wrongdoing.

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The addition of Hunter Biden and other prominent Westerners to the gas company board offered it a public image of stability when Ukraine's new government was going after the assets of former officials.

Hunter Biden and other Western board members set about overhauling the reputation of the gas company in the eyes of Europeans and Americans.

For many Ukrainians, Hunter Biden's involvement with a gas company linked to a former Yanukovich-era official sent the wrong signals. It was seen as counter to the anti-corruption message the U.S. vice president was extolling in Ukraine at the time.

U.S. officials involved in Ukraine policy also felt uncomfortable with Hunter Biden's activities. Yet the vice president's son continued to serve on the board, even as the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine at the time, Geoffrey R. Pyatt, pointed to Zlochevsky's case as an example of the new Ukrainian government's shortcomings in going after corruption.

At the time, Biden's office defended Hunter's leeway to serve on the board as a private citizen and said the vice president had nothing to do with the company and did not endorse its activities.

Dawsey and Sonne reported from Washington. David L. Stern in Prairie Village, Kan., and Matt Viser in Washington contributed to this report.

