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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Trump administration sought billions of dollars in cuts to programs aimed at fighting corruption in Ukraine and elsewhere

Democrats have slammed White House insistence that Trump was focused on corruption — not Bidens — when he blocked Ukraine aid funds.

By **Erica Werner**

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The Trump administration has sought repeatedly to cut foreign aid programs tasked with combating corruption in Ukraine and elsewhere overseas, White House budget documents show, despite recent claims from President Trump and his administration that they have been singularly concerned with fighting corruption in Ukraine.

Those claims have come as the president and his administration sought to explain away a July phone call between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, during which Trump pressured his counterpart to open investigations into Joe Biden and his son Hunter, and into a debunked conspiracy theory involving a hacked Democratic National Committee computer server.

“I don’t care about politics, but I do care about corruption. And this whole thing is about corruption,” Trump told reporters earlier this month when discussing the Ukraine issue. “This whole thing — this whole thing is about corruption.”

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The phone call is central to the impeachment inquiry by House Democrats. The Democrats have accused Trump of holding back a congressionally approved military aid package for Ukraine until Zelensky publicly committed to launching investigations into the Bidens. On Tuesday, the senior U.S. diplomat in Ukraine — acting ambassador William B. Taylor Jr. — told lawmakers that Trump made the release of military aid to Ukraine contingent on public declarations that it would investigate the Bidens and the 2016 election.

Trump, acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney and other administration officials have insisted repeatedly that their goal in delaying the military aid package to Ukraine was to ensure corruption was addressed in that country — not to produce political benefit to Trump.

“There were two reasons that we held up the aid. We talked about this at some length. The first one was the rampant corruption in Ukraine,” Mulvaney said on “Fox News Sunday.” “Corruption is a big deal; everyone knows it,” he said. (The second reason was to ensure that other nations contributed to Ukraine’s defense, Mulvaney said.)

The administration's professed interest in fighting corruption in Ukraine has not been reflected in its annual budget requests to Congress.

For example, the administration sought to cut a program called International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement. Among the goals of the program, as described in White House budget documents, is "helping U.S. partners address threats to U.S. interests by building resilience and promoting reform in the justice and law enforcement sectors through support to new institutions and specialized offices, such as Ukraine's National Anti-Corruption Bureau and Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office."

The program directs specific sums of money to individual countries. In 2019, \$30 million was directed to Ukraine, after Congress rejected an administration request to cut the sum to \$13 million. In its 2020 budget request, released in March, the administration again sought to cut the program's spending on Ukraine to \$13 million. Congress seems likely to once again reject the proposed cut, although lawmakers have yet to agree on any spending bills for the 2020 budget year that began Oct. 1.

In another example, the administration sought to streamline a number of overseas democracy assistance and foreign aid accounts under one larger umbrella called the Economic Support and Development Fund. The White House believed that consolidation would cut those programs by more than \$2 billion. This fund, too, is aimed at fighting corruption in countries around the world, among other goals, according to White House budget documents. Spending in Ukraine for the accounts in question was \$250 million in 2018; the White House has asked for \$145 million in 2020 under the new iteration of the program.

Democrats have alleged the White House's recent comments on combating corruption aren't consistent with the administration's track record.

"Numbers don't lie," Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said in a statement. "It's even more clear now that President Trump is not the anti-corruption crusader he claims to be. The House impeachment inquiry must continue unimpeded so all the facts can come out."

The Trump White House has routinely pursued deep cuts to foreign aid in its budget proposals, only to be rebuffed by Congress. The proposed cuts to anti-corruption programs were a byproduct of the administration's larger goals of cutting the budgets of the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development and were not specifically targeted, according to the White House Office of Management and Budget.

“The president has consistently sought across-the-board cuts to foreign aid, and has proposed more cuts in his budgets than any other president in history,” said Rachel Semmel, spokeswoman for the Office of Management and Budget. “He has also strongly encouraged other countries to contribute their own efforts and resources to their defense and reform efforts.”

Nonetheless, the cuts to anti-corruption aid stand in contrast to recent claims from administration officials and the president himself about being focused on corruption in Ukraine, raising the question of why the White House has not sought a larger budgetary commitment to addressing the issue. Democrats have largely dismissed the White House's insistence that Trump was focused on corruption, but White House officials continue to say it was a primary reason the military aid was held up.

“This is about corruption, and this is not about politics,” Trump said. “This is about corruption. And if you look and you read our Constitution and many other things, we — I have an obligation to look at corruption. I have an actual obligation and a duty.”

Impeachment: What you need to read

Updated December 30, 2019

Here's what you need to know to understand the impeachment of President Trump.

What's happening now: Trump is now the third U.S. president to be impeached, after the House of Representatives adopted both articles of impeachment against him.

What happens next: Impeachment does not mean that the president has been removed from office. The Senate must hold a trial to make that determination. A trial is expected to take place in January. Here's more on what happens next.

How we got here: A whistleblower complaint led Pelosi to announce the beginning of an official impeachment inquiry on Sept. 24. Closed-door hearings and subpoenaed documents related to the president's July 25 phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky followed. After two weeks of public hearings in November, the House Intelligence Committee wrote a report that was sent to the House Judiciary Committee, which held its own hearings. Pelosi and House Democrats announced the articles of impeachment against Trump on Dec. 10. The Judiciary Committee approved two articles of impeachment against Trump: abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.

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