

Debunking 4 Viral Rumors About the Bidens and Ukraine

As lawmakers examine whether President Trump pushed Ukraine to investigate the Biden family, here are some of the most prominent falsehoods that have spread online and an explanation of what really happened.

By **Davey Alba**

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Accusations that President Trump shaped American policy toward Ukraine for his own political gain exploded into a crisis for the White House in September after a whistle-blower complaint. Lawmakers have been examining how Mr. Trump pushed the Ukrainians to investigate the hacking of the Democratic National Committee in 2016 and former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. and his son Hunter, a lawyer and former lobbyist. Those questions are now at the center of the House's impeachment inquiry.

Once members of Congress turned their attention to Mr. Trump's dealings with Ukraine, incorrect statements about the former vice president and his son started circulating again in far-right corners of the internet and on social media platforms like Facebook. Mainstream conservative media outlets like Fox News began running with some of the theories and Mr. Trump echoed them.

Here are four of the most prominent false or misleading rumors that have spread and an explanation of what really happened (to the extent that we know).

Why was Ukraine's top prosecutor fired?

The allegation at the heart of the controversy is that while Mr. Biden was vice president, he pushed to have Ukraine's top prosecutor removed for investigating a company connected to Mr. Biden's son Hunter, the Ukrainian natural gas firm Burisma. Videos pushing this theory began appearing on Twitter in late September and early October and have been viewed tens of millions of times. Mr. Trump's campaign has also asserted the claim in ads on Facebook.

Vice President Biden was overseeing American policy toward Ukraine at the time, and he did push for the removal of the country's top prosecutor, who was seen as corrupt or ineffectual by the United States and Western European governments. But there is no evidence he did so to benefit Hunter Biden or the oligarch who owns Burisma, Mykola Zlochevsky.

In 2014, Hunter joined the board of Burisma, which was then mired in a corruption scandal. Authorities in Ukraine, Britain and the United States had opened investigations into the company's operations. Mr. Zlochevsky had also been accused of marshaling government contracts to companies he owned and embezzling public money.

At the time of his board appointment, the younger Mr. Biden had just been discharged from the Navy Reserve for drug use. He had no apparent experience in Ukraine or natural gas. And while accepting the board position was legal, it reportedly raised some eyebrows in the Obama administration. The Burisma board position was lucrative: Mr. Biden received payments that reached up to \$50,000 per month.

A year later, Viktor Shokin became Ukraine's prosecutor general, a job similar to the attorney general in the United States. He vowed to keep investigating Burisma amid an international push to root out corruption in Ukraine.

But the investigation went dormant under Mr. Shokin. In the fall of 2015, Joe Biden joined the chorus of Western officials calling for Mr. Shokin's ouster. The next March, Mr. Shokin was fired. A subsequent prosecutor cleared Mr. Zlochevsky.

Mr. Biden took credit for the firing of Mr. Shokin as a foreign policy win during a talk at the Council on Foreign Relations in January 2018, when he boasted about holding up a loan guarantee to Ukraine until Mr. Shokin was removed.

What is the relationship between Ukraine and CrowdStrike?

In 2016, the Democratic National Committee hired CrowdStrike, a cybersecurity firm, to investigate how hackers breached a D.N.C. network and released stolen emails from the committee and Hillary Clinton's campaign to WikiLeaks just months before the presidential election.

Mr. Trump has since fixated on CrowdStrike, saying that he "heard it's owned by a very rich Ukrainian." He has repeatedly voiced his theory that Ukraine — instead of, or in addition to, Russia — interfered in the 2016 election on behalf of the Democrats.

In his call with President Volodymyr Zelensky in July, Mr. Trump suggested that the company had moved a hacked D.N.C. server to Ukraine.

"The server, they say Ukraine has it," Mr. Trump said, according to notes describing the call.

There is no evidence to support Mr. Trump's assertions, which have spread widely online.

CrowdStrike, based in California, is not Ukrainian-owned and does not appear to have any Ukrainian connections. There is no evidence to suggest that CrowdStrike conspired to hide a compromised server in Ukraine.

The earliest conjectures about CrowdStrike apparently first surfaced on the message board 4chan in March 2017, according to BuzzFeed News. Less than a week later, they wound their way to Reddit, where r/The_Donald subreddit commenters had an animated discussion.

Until Mr. Trump's statements, however, even internet speculation did not assert that CrowdStrike was owned by a rich Ukrainian or suggest that a Democratic server was hidden in Ukraine.

"CrowdStrike's co-founder Dmitri Alperovitch is a Russia-born U.S. citizen, who has spent all of his adult life in the United States, and has no connection to Ukraine," the company says on its website.

CrowdStrike concluded that two espionage groups connected to Russia were responsible for the D.N.C. breach. The Justice Department and the F.B.I., after conducting their own investigations, confirmed that Russia hacked the emails. There was no single server and there was no indication that the company moved one to Ukraine.

Mr. Trump's own former Homeland Security secretary, Thomas P. Bossert, called the president's assertion that Ukraine intervened in the 2016 elections on behalf of the Democrats "not only a conspiracy theory" but "completely debunked."

Is the whistle-blower aligned politically with Democrats?

Mr. Trump's allies — and the president himself — have asserted that the whistle-blower is left-leaning and biased, a notion spread by the president's supporters across social media and right-wing websites.

Little is known about the whistle-blower other than that he is a career C.I.A. analyst. One of the whistle-blower's lawyers has rejected the claim that his client is partisan. "Our client has never worked for or advised a political candidate, campaign, or party," the lawyer, Mark Zaid, wrote in a series of tweets. "Our client has come into contact with presidential candidates from both parties in their roles as elected officials — not as candidates."

The whistle-blower, whose identity remains secret, was once detailed to the National Security Council at the White House. Michael Atkinson, the inspector general for the American intelligence community, found unspecified indications of "an arguable political bias," suggesting the whistle-blower favored a rival political candidate, according to a Justice Department memo. It's possible that the whistle-blower did interact with the vice president. Officials from the National Security Council regularly work in the White House for briefings and other meetings.

A claim that the whistle-blower colluded with Mr. Biden to file a report is baseless — as are other claims that whistle-blower rules were secretly changed to allow a complaint based on “hearsay” and that the whistle-blower’s lawyers are all left-leaning.

What were Hunter Biden’s other foreign business relationships?

Critics of Hunter Biden have sought other areas ripe for sowing disinformation. One they have homed in on is his dealings in China.

Mr. Biden is involved with companies that have struck several deals in China over the past decade. On Oct. 13, Mr. Biden said he would step down from the board of directors of a Chinese-backed equity firm as part of a pledge to not work on behalf of any foreign-owned companies should his father win the presidency.

While the amount of money Hunter Biden made from those deals remains unknown, Mr. Trump has said that China handed over \$1.5 billion to Mr. Biden in a “sweetheart” business deal meant to win favor with his father. While the claim is unfounded, it spread as the president and Rudolph W. Giuliani, Mr. Trump’s personal lawyer, repeated it in several news conferences and television appearances. Fox News also reported the claim. The rumor circulated to hundreds of thousands of Facebook users through groups like a pro-Trump conspiracy clearinghouse and a fan page of the first lady of the United States. The Bidens have each said they never discussed Hunter’s business in China.

The \$1.5 billion figure Mr. Trump has referred to appears to be the amount of money a Shanghai private-equity company raised in 2014. Hunter Biden joined the board of the company, BHR Equity Investment Fund Management, in late 2013. In 2017, he bought 10 percent of the firm, investing the equivalent of \$420,000.

How much Mr. Biden has earned from his deals in China is unclear. A lawyer representing Mr. Biden said he had never been paid for his role on the board, and had not profited financially since he began as a part owner.

China has rejected Mr. Trump’s call to investigate the Bidens.

Ben Decker contributed reporting.

Davey Alba is a technology reporter covering disinformation. In 2019, she won a Livingston Award for excellence in international reporting and a Mirror Award for best story on journalism in peril. More about Davey Alba