

FOREIGN POLICY

Ukraine president downplays Trump pressures in all-day media marathon



By ASSOCIATED PRESS
10/10/2019 08:24 AM EDT



KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Thursday there was “no blackmail” in the phone call with U.S. President Donald Trump that helped spark an impeachment inquiry.

Zelenskyy is trying to save his reputation and distance himself from the U.S. political drama. In an all-day “media marathon” held in a food court, he played down suggestions that Trump pressured him to investigate Democratic rival Joe Biden in exchange for military aid to help Ukraine battle Russian-backed separatists.

AD

Responding to questions from The Associated Press, Zelenskiy said he only learned after their July 25 phone call that the U.S. had blocked hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid to Ukraine.

“We didn’t speak about this” during the July call, Zelenskiy said.

“There was no blackmail.”

Trump asked Zelenskiy during the call to “look into” Biden and his son, according to a rough White House transcript. Congressional Democrats believe Trump was holding up the military aid to use as leverage to pressure Ukraine and advance his domestic political interests before next year’s U.S. presidential election.

The July call is central to the impeachment inquiry, and embarrassed Zelenskiy because it showed him as eager to please Trump and critical of European partners whose support he needs to strengthen Ukraine’s economy and to end the conflict with Russia.

He said he “didn’t even check” whether the Ukrainian transcript of the July call is the same as that of the White House, but says “I think they match.”

Trump later said the military aid was frozen because of concerns about corruption in Ukraine, but the move prompted congressional outcry and the money was released in September.

But Zelenskiy said the call “wasn’t linked to weapons or the story with (Ukrainian gas company) Burisma,” where Biden’s son Hunter served on the board.

Asked what Ukraine did to persuade the U.S. to release the aid, Zelenskiy said: “We have many diplomatic contacts. And in case we need to find a solution to questions of this level, questions about our country’s security, we use all our powerful possibilities.” He didn’t elaborate.

“I don’t want to interfere in any way in the elections” in the U.S., he said. Zelenskiy appears to be playing to both U.S. political camps to ensure Ukraine has continued support no matter who wins the presidential election next year.

Story Continued Below



AD

Zelenskiy said he thought the call would lead to an in-person meeting with Trump, and wanted the American leader to come to Ukraine. Zelenskiy said the “key question” for him was to try to persuade the White House to “change its rhetoric” about Ukraine as a corrupt and untrustworthy country.

He said he wanted to meet with Trump in person but that there were “no conditions” set for such a meeting.

He said he had “several calls” with Trump, but bristled at repeated questions about their relationship. “We are an independent country, we have relations with many countries,” not just the U.S., he said.

A TV and film comedian, Zelenskiy overwhelmingly won the presidency in April on promises to fight corruption and end the five-year conflict with Moscow-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. He's treading carefully to ensure continued support from the U.S. while trying to make peace with powerful neighbor Russia.

Most of the questions at Thursday's unusual media event related to the Russia conflict or Ukraine's economic troubles.

In the July call, Trump sought help on two fronts. The first involves Trump's claims that Ukraine allied with the Democrats in a plot to derail his 2016 presidential campaign. No evidence of such a plot has emerged.

At the same time, Trump is also pushing Ukraine to investigate any potential wrongdoing by the Bidens. Trump has said the United States has an "absolute right" to ask foreign leaders to investigate corruption cases, though no one has produced evidence of criminal wrongdoing by the former U.S. vice president or his son.

Zelenskiy also joked about Trump's Twitter missives, saying he doesn't expect a change in U.S.-Ukrainian relations in the future, "but if there is, we'll learn about it on Twitter."

[SHOW COMMENTS](#)

[About Us](#)

[Advertising](#)

[Breaking News Alerts](#)

[Careers](#)

[Credit Card Payments](#)

[Digital Edition](#)

[FAQ](#)

[Feedback](#)

[Headlines](#)

[Photos](#)

[POWERJobs](#)

[Press](#)

[Print Subscriptions](#)

[Write For Us](#)

[RSS](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Terms of Service](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

© 2019 POLITICO LLC