

# Ukraine's Fraught Summer Included a Rogue Embassy in Washington

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- ▶ Parliament, cabinet and embassy were loyal to Poroshenko
  - ▶ Embassy knew aid was frozen but didn't give word, Yermak says
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Volodymyr Zelenskyy *Photographer: Evgeniy Maloletka/Bloomberg*

The Ukrainians hit roadblocks throughout the summer. To hear them tell it, they didn't see the U.S. as the biggest one.

The new government under President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was fighting not only Russia in the east, but also the remnants of the previous administration. Desperate for warmer relations with the Trump White House, it was being hemmed in by ex-President Petro Poroshenko's legacy and holdovers from his government.

The Poroshenko-era officials were at odds with Zelenskyy's team and possibly running interference, said Andriy Yermak, an adviser to Zelenskyy.

“We inherited a lot of baggage when we came to power,” Yermak said in an interview at the presidential headquarters in Kyiv. “We think our ambassador to the U.S., and perhaps some other officials in the foreign ministry, were concealing information to create problems for the new team, and to embarrass the president first of all, to put him in a difficult situation.”

Only in hindsight did the Ukrainians fully understand the Americans’ demands, Yermak explained, as improbable as that may seem to those tracking impeachment proceedings in the U.S.

From his perspective, the Ukrainians were promising to fight corruption, which had been the central premise of Zelenskiy’s campaign. In recent weeks, other high-ranking Ukrainians who have asked not to be identified, citing the sensitivity of relations with the U.S., echoed that point.

That view may help explain why Zelenskiy and his associates seemed slow to respond to months of calls from people around President Donald Trump that they publicly announce investigations into Ukraine’s role in the 2016 U.S. election and Burisma, the gas company that had former Vice President Joe Biden’s son on the board. At least one Republican congressman in impeachment hearings has asked why, if the U.S. was exerting so much pressure, didn’t Zelenskiy and his team complain.

## **Priority Meeting**

Yermak, who speaks English but requested the interview be conducted in Ukrainian or Russian, is one of the central Ukrainians to emerge in the impeachment inquiry playing out in Washington.

Soon after Zelenskiy was elected in April, Yermak and other top aides prioritized getting a meeting with Trump, which they saw as an important signal of U.S. support in Ukraine’s battle with Russia.

Yermak met with Rudy Giuliani, Trump’s lawyer, in Madrid in early August. He was on text messages and phone calls with U.S. envoys Gordon Sondland and Kurt Volker in pursuit first of a White House meeting between the two presidents and then in pursuit of frozen military aid.

The Ukrainians’ visibility, however, was limited in part because officials remaining from Poroshenko’s time withheld information from the incoming team, Yermak said.

Zelenskiy was inaugurated in May. But without support in parliament, he was little more than a figurehead, unable to appoint prosecutors, a foreign minister or other cabinet members. He called early parliamentary elections, and after his party won in July, began that administrative process.

Until then, much of the country’s government, including the Ukrainian embassy in Washington, D.C., reported to officials appointed by Poroshenko. That was true when the Ukrainian embassy in Washington learned in late July that the U.S. had frozen military aid, according to Yermak and another person familiar with the matter.

Another account of the embassy officials' work emerged this week. Laura Cooper, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia, testified that her staff received an email on July 25 from Ukraine's embassy asking about the status of the military aid.

Those embassy officials did not inform Zelenskiy right away that the aid was threatened, Yermak and the other person said, adding that the Ukrainian president and his key advisers learned of it only in a Politico report in late August. Had the top people in Kyiv known about the holdup earlier, they said, the matter would have been raised with National Security Advisor John Bolton during his visit on Aug. 27.

Ukraine's then-Ambassador to the U.S., Valeriy Chaly, declined to comment. He was dismissed by Zelenskiy in July and left his post in mid-September. Poroshenko also declined to comment.

U.S. Democrats and witnesses have pointed out in impeachment hearings that Ukraine was dependent on U.S. political and military support while these discussions occurred about whether to make a public announcement on Biden and election investigations. The stakes grew when Zelenskiy's circle learned aid was being held up, too.

In his interview, Yermak reiterated that the Ukrainians didn't feel pressured by the U.S. Ambassador Sondland testified this week that he saw a "quid pro quo," meaning the announcement of investigations was a condition of getting a White House meeting. Sondland also said that in a brief conversation in Warsaw on September 1, he told Yermak about the "likely" link.

Yermak said they bumped into each other on the way to the escalators. He recalled Sondland conveying that a meeting with the U.S. vice president had gone well but said he doesn't remember any reference to military aid.

## **Inner Circle**

A lawyer and film producer, Yermak, 48, sits in the inner circle with Zelenskiy, who gained fame in Ukraine as a TV comedian before becoming president. After his surprise victory, Zelenskiy staffed his administration with trusted friends who were screenwriters and producers. Many of his advisers have never worked in government. They stepped straight into complicated and unprecedented diplomatic negotiations.

As Yermak describes the fraught summer, Poroshenko created the mess they inherited.

"I blame our predecessors," Yermak said. "Ukraine didn't have a positive image in the eyes of American society. It had an image of a corrupt country, a country whose politicians were meddling into domestic affairs of other countries."

Ukraine was on its back foot, in part, after Poroshenko's officials criticized Trump during the 2016 U.S. presidential race. Their comments came after Trump said he might recognize Crimea as Russian.

Poroshenko tried to mend fences by meeting with Giuliani at least twice in 2017 in Kyiv, where the former New York mayor traveled for a paid speech and security consulting work. Less than two weeks after meeting Giuliani in June of that year, Poroshenko secured a “drop-in” visit to the White House.

He continued to cultivate Trump allies. In February of this year, Poroshenko met with Giuliani associates Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman at the offices of his prosecutor general, Yuri Lutsenko. There, according to the Wall Street Journal, the visitors encouraged Poroshenko to announce investigations into Burisma and Ukrainians role in the 2016 U.S. election.

A spokeswoman for Poroshenko denied any “negotiations” occurred with Parnas and Fruman but didn’t comment on the meeting itself.

## **U.S. Support**

Seeking U.S. support while poll numbers were sinking, Ukrainian embassy officials in Washington were told that Poroshenko could expect an invite to visit the White House just ahead of his run-off election with Zelenskiy on April 21. The visit didn’t happen.

Poroshenko lost. Behind the scenes, his allies still wielded considerable power. Lutsenko, the top prosecutor, remained in his post until the end of August, when the new parliament convened to approve Zelenskiy’s choice to replace him. According to impeachment testimonies, U.S. diplomats learned on July 10 that Giuliani was still meeting with Lutsenko, who was telling Ukrainian officials that the meeting between Trump and Zelenskiy wasn’t going to happen.

“Good grief,” Volker texted other U.S. officials that day. “[L]utsenko has his own self-interest here.”

## **Approaching Giuliani**

That same month, Yermak was working to dispel the notion that the new Ukraine government was corrupt. Giuliani had surprised them when he told an interviewer that “there were enemies of the U.S.” in President Zelenskiy’s team.

“We never met Giuliani before,” Yermak said. “I suggested we ask Giuliani directly why he thought so.”

Yermak traveled to Washington in early July, meeting at the White House with officials including Volker, Sondland and John Bolton, the National Security Adviser.

Afterward, he spoke with top national security advisers to the minority and majority leaders in both the U.S. House and Senate. He told them that he planned to talk to Giuliani to explain the nation’s reform agenda and to urge him not to communicate with Ukraine through the media.

“Everyone said: ‘good idea,’” Yermak recalled.

He followed up in Spain the next month. Giuliani was accompanied by Parnas, who has since been charged with funneling foreign money into U.S. political campaigns. Parnas’s attendance was reported previously by the Daily Beast. A lawyer for Parnas didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Yermak said he spoke only to the president’s lawyer and didn’t know who Parnas was.

“Giuliani asked me whether I had heard about Burisma and I told him that I had not,” Yermak said. “He also asked whether I know that the American media is discussing Ukraine’s meddling of the elections in 2016. I told him that all I knew was what I read in the media. I told him I have nothing to say because these issues are not actively discussed in Ukraine and I did not know what was going on in the prosecutor general’s office.”