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WORLD

## Ukrainian President Denies Trump Pressured Him During July Call

'There was no blackmail,' Volodymyr Zelensky tells reporters at a rare all-day press event in Kyiv



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, left, spoke to reporters at a food court in Kyiv on Thursday. PHOTO: SERGEY DOLZHENKO/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

*By Georgi Kantchev*

Updated Oct. 10, 2019 8:35 am ET

KYIV, Ukraine—Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky denied that President Trump tried to pressure him during a July phone call that is now at the heart of an impeachment inquiry in Washington and a messy U.S. political scandal.

“There was no blackmail,” Mr. Zelensky told reporters at an all-day “press marathon” in Ukraine’s capital Thursday.

During the call, Mr. Trump pressed the new Ukrainian leader to look into the activities of his political rival Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden in Ukraine, and into alleged Ukrainian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, according to a rough transcript released by the White House in September.

The revelations thrust Mr. Zelensky, a former comedian and a political neophyte elected in April, into a partisan fight in the U.S., on which Ukraine depends for help fending off Russian aggression.

On Thursday, Mr. Zelensky said his country should probe whether Ukrainians interfered in the 2016 U.S. elections, adding that he didn't know whether any meddling actually occurred.

"I think the Ukrainians should investigate this themselves," Mr. Zelensky said. "It is our business, it is very important for us that we never interfere in the elections of any country in the future."

In response to a question on whether Ukraine would investigate the Bidens, Mr. Zelensky said he wanted to avoid influencing the 2020 U.S. elections at all.

"I do not want to interfere in any way with the elections of an independent country called the United States of America," he said. "Choose your president yourself."

Mr. Zelensky has previously said Ukraine is open to investigating any illegal behavior. A Ukrainian prosecutor said in May he had no evidence of wrongdoing by Joe or Hunter Biden.

Despite initial efforts to stay away from U.S. politics, including declining a meeting with Mr. Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani in May, Mr. Zelensky got sucked into the affair.

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Over the summer, Mr. Zelensky's new and inexperienced team tried to decipher conflicting signals from Washington, which included the lure of a potential White House summit and various overtures by Mr. Giuliani, both before and after the phone call with Mr. Trump.

Most crucially for Kyiv, which is battling Moscow-backed separatists in the East, the Ukrainians learned weeks after the decision that Washington would withhold nearly \$400 million in approved military assistance. The aid was then unlocked in September.

On Thursday, Mr. Zelensky said he was unaware of the aid suspension before his call with Mr. Trump in July and that he subsequently raised the issue at a meeting with Vice President Mike Pence in Warsaw in September.

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“I told [Mr. Pence] that this is impossible. Please do something about this,”

Mr. Zelensky recounted Thursday. “After the meeting, America unblocked it.”

He said the aim of the July call with Mr. Trump was to pave the way for a still-hoped for White House summit.

“We look forward to an official visit to the United States,” he said. “This is a very important signal for our partners that the United States supports the strategy and generally supports the policy of Ukraine.”

Mr. Zelensky, whose press strategy more often involves posting videos on social media than interviews with journalists, held Thursday’s press event at a popular food court in Kyiv.

“I am now in the center of attention of the world media—for some reason it happened—I did not want it to,” he said. “It was in my past life [as a television personality]...that I really wanted to be world famous. But not because of such a case.”

Mr. Zelensky said he was indifferent as to what happened with Burisma, a large Ukrainian gas company that had Hunter Biden on its board. Ukraine’s prosecutor general’s office said Friday it was reviewing past investigations into Burisma’s owner.

“I’m not going to personally investigate Burisma or say—no, do not investigate! I don’t care what will happen to this case,” Mr. Zelensky said. “I do not want to be involved.”

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